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THE GREY HOUSE
AT
ENDLESTONE

BY EMMA JANE WORBOISE.



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THE GREY HOUSE AT ENDLESTONE.

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE,

*Author of "Lady Clarissa," "Oliver Westwood," "Nobly Born," "Father Fabian,"
"The House of Bondage," "Husbands and Wives," &c., &c.*

" I bared my head to meet the smiter's stroke ;
 There came sweet dropping oil.
I waited, trembling, but the voice that spoke
 Said gently, 'Cease thy toil.'

" I looked for evil, stern of face and pale ;
 Came good, too fair to tell.
I leant on God when other joys did fail
 He gave me those as well."



Gordon:

JAMES CLARKE AND CO., 13, FLEET STREET.
HODDER AND STOUGHTON, PATERNOSTER ROW.

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1877.

251 . c . 619 .
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LONDON :
W. SPEAIGHT & SONS, PRINTERS, FETTER LANE.

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THE GREY HOUSE AT ENDLESTONE.

CHAPTER I.

A PAGE FROM HILDA'S DIARY.

“ Unthinking, idle, wild, and young,
I laughed and talked, and danced and sung ;
And proud of health, of freedom vain,
Dreamed not of sorrow, care, or pain ;
Concluding in those hours of glee
That all the world was made for me.”

“ O Life, O Beyond,
Thou art strange, thou art sweet.”

“ How beautiful is life ! What a happy world is this ! How sweet it is to live—to love ! And yet cynics would have us believe that sorrow is the natural inheritance of poor, frail mortality ; that pitfalls and snares beset our path from the cradle to the grave ; that disappointments and vexations are the common lot ! Well ! some people, I suppose, do have rather a troublesome time of it ; there are the sick, the poverty-stricken, the unlucky, the friendless, to say nothing of the gloomy, ill-tempered folk, who look always on the dark side of things, and cast their own unlovely shadow on all around them—these, perhaps, have some reason to affirm that life is a vale of tears, happiness a myth, and expectation a veritable jack-o'-lantern ! But I !—I am very happy ! Words cannot express my felicity, my full content with the fate



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that, to say nothing of engagements earlier in the day—though she has done enough to tire a maid-of-all-work, she is not weary, and feels that she could sit up several hours longer musing on the new-born happiness which seems to her the crown of her happy, thrice happy, girlhood. Only, it is not expedient; there are sounds of life without, the morning is brightening into day, and Horace will certainly be there before luncheon. Henceforth, he will be one of the family, for Hilda has no misgivings as to her father's acceptance of a suitor, whom even her worldly Aunt Mowbray emphatically speaks of as "*eligible!*"

We have seen that she hesitated to rank herself as a beauty, and she was right. But, nevertheless, Hilda Capel was "*a maiden fair to see;*" she was tall, graceful, and withal, as Horace Trelawny affirmed, rather "*duchess-like*"—that is to say, there was a certain natural stateliness in her manner and bearing; she was perfectly well-made, and her shapely head was set on a firm, though slender, white throat, which rose pillar-like from drooping shoulders. Her skin was smooth and clear, her hair of a rich brown, glossy and abundant, her eyes of a soft, deep grey, and her features tolerably regular, though not absolutely faultless. But Hilda's great charm of countenance lay in her expression, which was sweet and earnest—wonderfully earnest, when you take into account her shallow education, and her worldly and painfully irreligious training. For, born and baptized in a Christian country, and brought up as a nominal member of the English State Church, required to read her daily chapter in the Bible up to a certain age, taught her catechism, and, in due course, confirmed, Hilda Capel was at heart, and in aspiration, little better than a refined and highly moral heathen.

She looks lovely to-night, or rather this morning, as she stands before the glass twisting up her long, silken hair into a net. Her face is radiant with her inward joy; that perfect happiness which she has just chronicled in her "*Diary*" is reflected in every feature; she might stand for a portrait of Euphrosyne. And her happiness is perfect, because it has not yet occurred to her that the

change and loss which really, after all, *are* in the world, can ever come to her; because she cannot guess that the golden chalice she now holds filled to the brim with life's sweet, fine wine, can ever be emptied out, and changed into a cup of bitterness, overflowing with gall and wormwood—a nauseous draught from which her lips recoil, and her palate shudders; because she has gathered roses ever since she can remember—roses in bud and in bloom, lilies full of odorous dews, purple heartsease and golden-eyed forget-me-nots,—gathered them by handfuls at her will, without once being wounded by the thorns, or plucking instead of flowers brambles, briars, and stinging, noxious weeds. There are thorns and weeds in the world, she knows, but not for her! Bitter herbs and acrid waters, darkened days and tearful nights—but not for her! not for happy Hilda Capel, rich and fair, young and spirited, and the fortunate betrothed of Horace Trelawny.

At length, her gay attire laid aside, and her flowers and jewels scattered here and there, she lay down on her soft, white pillows, and slept the sound, refreshing sleep of youthful health and happiness. But ere she closed her eyes, no prayer passed her sweet, “crimson-threaded lips,” no involuntary thanksgiving for so much joy went up to Him, “from whom all blessings flow.” And yet she lay down in peace and awoke in gladness, for her Father, of whose love she took so little count, watched over her, and folded her—poor thoughtless child of earth—safe under the shadow of His wings; for the Lord loved her, and cared for her, and watched over her, though she neither loved nor cared for Him, nor watched for tokens of His favour; for His ways are not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts, and His mercies are vouchsafed to the evil and the good. *Only*, the soul that sins shall suffer; it cannot dwell apart from God and not sustain a grievous loss; it must come to Him, if not in the calm, in the storm, if not in the sunshine, in the shadow, if not by the rills of Siloam by the desolate Dead Sea shores. “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.” *All who forget God!*

So wrote the Psalmist in olden time, and the experience

of saints and sinners ever since has all tended to confirm his declaration. For there is, certainly, a hell upon earth—a hell in the inmost heart of every person whose life here is practically godless, whatever may be the miseries of the Gehenna or Tartarus which await the finally impenitent. Out of God, there can be no real happiness; no joys that are not as the many-coloured air bubbles blown by children; no pleasures that will not presently pall upon the taste, and from luscious fruits become as apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but within mere dust and bitterness.

Moreover, said the Psalmist: “In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.” And this also is true of the present life as well as of that which is to come. For God is present now as then, and His obedient children are for ever at His right hand in the place of privilege and honour. Heaven and hell may be figures of speech and signify states of being rather than actual places of abode; but this is sure—that heaven is about us now, though but dimly felt and comprehended, if only we walk with God and seek to do His will in love and not in fear; and that hell is at our very doors, nay, goes with us wherever we go, if, refusing God’s grace and rejecting the Gospel of His Son, we live carnal, worldly lives, steeped in selfishness (which is the root of all sin), and forget our Father, whose loving-kindness has given us all things richly to enjoy.

Certainly, Hilda Capel was not wicked in the general acceptance of the term. On the contrary, she was amiable, generous, naturally sweet-tempered, and inclined, by force of education and surroundings, to virtue rather than to vice. But God was unthought of. She lived a prayerless, thankless life, saying, “Our Father” with her lips in church, but never in secret lifting up her heart to Him, never in any of her ways acknowledging Him, never seeking His favour or His guidance; content to have her portion in this life, to enjoy all good and pleasant things, without one remembrance of the liberal hand that gave them. And all the while it never occurred to her that she was other than she ought to be; that her so-called religion, limited to a single Sunday service, was the merest,

hollowest form that could be imagined—the husk without the grain, the watch without the spring, the vase without the perfume!

After about six hours' profound slumber, Hilda awoke, and saw the sunshine streaming in through the blinds, and her beautiful ball-dress lying across a chair. Then she remembered all that had happened the night before; she recalled her lover's every word and look, and at the same time recollected that he would come early to pay his respects to Mrs. Mowbray, and to settle which would be the more expedient—to write to Major Capel, who was at present residing in Paris, or to run over and pay him an unexpected visit.

Major Capel was, as you will readily understand, Hilda's father—a fashionable, selfish man of the world, universally popular in the society which he affected, and generally supposed to be exceedingly wealthy. Hilda was his only child and sole heiress, and when her mother died, twelve years before, she had been, at that mother's earnest request, consigned to the care of her widowed sister, who promised, on her part, to superintend the education of her niece, and finally "bring her out" at the proper age, and act as her chaperon till she married. And Major Capel was well content with this arrangement. The gay life which he led indisposed him to any kind of domestic incubus; his wife had not been too happy, though she had not openly complained of unkindness or neglect, and the care of a child, however nominal the charge, would have been a restraint to which nothing could induce him to submit. He was only too well pleased to find that his sister-in-law, who was well received in the "best society," was willing to relieve him of his parental obligations. The little Hilda was accordingly committed to her aunt, who undertook the whole responsibility of her bringing up, on condition of a handsome allowance, to be largely increased when her niece should attain her eighteenth year. For Mrs. Mowbray had expensive habits and a limited income, and the liberal arrangements which her brother-in-law was quite willing to make would add greatly to her comfort, and enable her to hold a better position in her own circle than would otherwise have been

possible. And my readers will understand how greatly she appreciated these advantages when I repeat that she was in every particular a selfish, fashionable woman of the world—just that, and nothing more.

Hilda, being of an affectionate nature, grew up with a certain attachment to her aunt. She was instructed in all that is supposed to be included in the education of a young lady of the upper ten thousand. She had excellent abilities and an inquiring mind, and so she really knew more than might have been expected, considering how frequently she was desired not to spoil her eyes poring over books, nor to injure her figure or her complexion by too close application to any favourite study, and how often reminded that a girl with her fortune and claims to beauty had no need to slave in the schoolroom like the luckless maidens whose acquirements must be alike their dowry and stock-in-trade. "Do not make Miss Capel a *blue stocking*, or a *femme incomprise*," said Mrs. Mowbray, to the highly recommended French governess, who considered herself capable of imparting every kind of knowledge, and all sorts of accomplishments; while at the same time she professed to devote herself to the high moral culture and religious training of her pupils! "To give a girl the reputation of a *savante* is seriously to injure her prospects; the days of Sevigné and De Staël are for ever passed. It was all very well for you, who have to earn your bread as a governess, to learn everything under the sun, and to learn it thoroughly; but art, science, and philosophy are useless to a young lady who has only to please herself and to shine in fashionable society. No amount of erudition, no number of ologies, will help her to a good marriage—which, I take it, is the end and aim of every rational and well-trained young woman. Miss Capel must speak French fluently—if possible, German also; and she ought to be able to read and pronounce Italian sufficiently to make out the *libretto* of an opera without the help of a translation. Of course she must dance gracefully, but that will not depend on you so much as upon M. Chateau and Mademoiselle Cleary, her mistress of deportment. She must play brilliantly, and sing really well, but I will not have her tormented with

thorough-bass, whatever that may be, or any useless nonsense of that sort; and she ought to sketch a little, I suppose; and you may teach her a little botany, if you like, and just as much astronomy as will enable her to know *Ursa Major* from the Pleiades. I am not sure that I know them myself, and I have done very well without knowing; but such things are talked about now more than they were in my young days, and it is not desirable to appear more ignorant than others, or to be unable to mix in general conversation. In short, fit her to appear gracefully and effectively in society, when the time comes, and I shall be contented. I need not suggest that her morals should be carefully attended to, and that she should be properly grounded in the principles of the Protestant religion. Lady John Maltravers assures me, that though convent-bred, you are not a Papist."

"Oh! no, indeed, madame; I am Protestant, I do assure you," replied the obsequious governess, who held no creed at all, and would unhesitatingly have conformed to Buddhism, had it seemed expedient. "I exactly comprehend what it is you require, and I undertake that *ma chère et belle élève* shall be all that you desire. As for me, I detest a *bas-bleu*; as you say, it is only we poor governesses who are compelled to toil at real learning; young ladies of rank and fashion, especially those who are handsome and rich, are better without too much education. A little of everything is my maxim; and plenty of style. Ah! madame, style and grace are everything to a young lady. I give you my word that Mademoiselle Capel shall perfectly acquire the one and the other."

And Mrs. Mowbray retired, well satisfied; and Mademoiselle La Violette reigned in the schoolroom, and did her best to mould the thirteen-years-old Hilda into a fashionable young lady. For three years she held sway, and then, some misunderstanding taking place between herself and her patroness, she resigned her post, and Hilda was sent to a Paris *pension*, and afterwards to an expensive school in Germany.

And now she was altogether free of masters and governesses; she had been presented, and her first season was a decided success. She had been admired, courted, envied,

and the Honourable Horace Trelawny, second son of the Earl of Camelford—with every prospect of succeeding to the title, his eldest brother being a life-long invalid, and almost certain not to marry—had formally proposed, and had been unhesitatingly accepted,—not merely as a *bon-parti*, as we have seen; not at all, indeed, on account of any temporal advantages, either present or to come; but simply because the girl loved him with all the warm and pure affection of her girlish heart. Hilda's education had made her externally a fine lady, but it had not really spoiled her, and there were in her nature a depth and sincerity, an unalloyed simplicity, of which her aunt and her closest friends never dreamed, and of which she was herself scarcely cognisant.

Mrs. Mowbray breakfasted always, when they were alone, in her own room, and thither Hilda, as soon as she had taken her coffee, repaired. Attired in a richly embroidered white muslin, relieved by one or two knots of pale rose ribbon, and all the soft bloom of youth and health and happiness on her cheeks, she looked her very best.

"Well, Hilda!" said her aunt, when the usual morning salutations had passed between them, "I must say dissipation seems to agree with you. It is just the end of the season, and your roses are as fresh, and your eyes as bright, as on the day you left the schoolroom. Who would think you had danced till four o'clock this morning?"

"I have had a good sleep since then, and I am quite rested."

"What is the matter, Hilda? I read something more than ordinary in your face. How you blush, child! It is becoming, however; but don't get into a habit of blushing—it proves too much self-consciousness, which is not well-bred; besides, it is altogether like a milk-maid."

"The matter is only that I am so very happy, auntie."

"Has all been settled between you and Horace Trelawny, then?"

"Yes; that is to say, I have told him he may write to papa—and he is coming here presently, to see you, auntie. I knew that you approved."

"I quite approve. If I did not, I should have inter-

fered ere this, my dear ; for, of course, I perceived some weeks since how it was likely to be ! Yes ! you have done well, though with your face and fortune you might have done better. I shall tell your father that it is really a good match. Though, understand, Hilda, I should have discouraged Mr. Trelawny at once, I should never have allowed the intimacy, had his position with regard to the title been other than it is."

"I do not understand, I think."

"I mean as regards his brother, who will certainly die young and unmarried, leaving the way clear for your Horace. Were he simply a younger brother I should have kept you apart; you will grace a coronet, and I intend that you shall wear one."

"Aunt ! that sounds *horrid* ! It is so calculating, so hard ! Besides, I tell you plainly, I thought nothing about Horace's possible prospects when I accepted him. I am going to marry him because I love him ; because he is the one man in all the world for me ; because, without him, all my life to come would be a blank—a void."

"Hilda, I am astonished ! I am pained ! It humbles me to hear you talk in such a strain ; you are scarcely modest."

"Oh, aunt !" cried Hilda, deeply pained, the pink roses of her cheeks flushing to crimson, and spreading over neck and brow, "I should not think of saying so much to any one else, and I would not have said it to you yesterday ; I would scarcely have allowed it to myself. But now—now that Horace has told me how much he loves me, now that we are actually engaged, and that it is settled that I am to be his wife, I may surely admit to *you* that I do honestly care for my future husband. I do not think, though, I should have said so much, had you not half implied that I had taken into account the infirmities and declining health of poor Lord Polperro. I would not for the world be mercenary ; I don't care a jot for money."

"That is because you have never wanted it, my dear ; you would tell a different tale if you had ever known the misery of debt and empty pockets."

"I cannot imagine it. One must manage very badly to get into debt, I should think."

"You have never had to manage at all, therefore you are not a judge; if you were poor now——"

"Oh, *poor!* I should be miserable! I have always had everything I wanted, and I always shall, I hope. That is not being mercenary, I suppose?"

"It inclines that way, Hilda; and I think, in spite of your romantic affirmations, that Mr. Trelawny, as a poor curate, a briefless barrister, or an impecunious younger son without prospects, would have had little chance with you."

"Rich or poor, Mr. Trelawny would always have been Mr. Trelawny."

"Well, my dear, I will not argue with you. Your choice is an excellent one, or I should scold you, and perhaps shut you up till you came to your senses. As it is, you can afford to indulge in a little sentimentality; but don't look so radiantly happy, child, or you will make your lover conceited."

"I will try to be demure; but really, I do feel so very happy—about as happy as I can ever be, I do believe."

"It is not well to feel in that way," said Mrs. Mowbray, gravely. "It makes me shiver to hear you talk, and to see you look so wonderfully elate. Extremes of feeling, like extremes of opinion and extremes of action, are always dangerous. I forget whether it is in the Bible, or in Shakespeare—but one or the other says, 'Boast not thyself of to-morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.' A very wise and useful caution, whoever said it."

"Oh! to-morrow will be all right as well as to-day," replied Hilda lightly, re-arranging the ribbons in her hair.

Little she dreamed of all that day would bring forth. Little thought either elder or younger woman how that day, so brightly begun, would close in tears and pain.

CHAPTER II.

MORNING AND EVENING.

“Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break.”

HILDA spent a very pleasant morning with her lover—a morning that, in after days, seemed bright and unreal as a fairy tale. Just as luncheon was over, Hilda was called away to speak with her dressmaker, and Mr. Trelawny and Mrs. Mowbray were left alone; they seized the opportunity and entered at once into confidential communication. It appeared by their conversation that they were kindred spirits, and quite understood each other. “Let me thank you, Mrs. Mowbray, for having so favourably received my proposals for your niece’s hand,” commenced Horace, with a certain formality, of which the lady highly approved.

“I am very glad that I was able so to receive them,” replied Mrs. Mowbray, graciously. “I should have been sincerely pained had it been my duty to interfere between you; as it doubtless would have been, had Hilda shown an unwise partiality. As it is, I congratulate her on her choice—I congratulate you both; you seem made for each other.”

“You know I am not rich. My father is generous; still, I have but a younger son’s portion, and the estates are strictly entailed.”

“That is as it should be. I can scarcely look upon you, Mr. Trelawny, as an ordinary younger son, for the succession is as plainly yours as if you had been your parents’ first-born. Your poor brother will scarcely survive your father—a sad trial to you all, of course, but, nevertheless, a fact.”

“I grieve to say that my poor brother’s days are, to all appearance, and in the opinion of the best medical authorities, drawing to a close. He may linger a year or

two, or even longer, or he may sink rapidly. On this account, I shall urge Major Capel to consent to a speedy marriage, and, his consent given, I shall at once, with your permission, press Hilda to name an early day."

"I have no objection, provided sufficient time be allowed for the *trousseau* and the settlements. Major Capel, I feel assured, will be very particular on that point. And that reminds me—Hilda said you were undecided between writing to the Major and running over to Paris for a personal interview. Which course will you pursue?"

"I told Hilda an hour ago that I had made up my mind to see her father. We have never met, and it is only fair that he should see the son-in-law on whom he is about, I hope, to bestow his paternal affection. Besides, it is so much easier to discuss money-matters face to face than by letter, and I must clearly understand what I am to have with Hilda. Though the future Viscount, and prospective Earl, I am not at present *rich*; and, as there is nothing like frankness, I may as well tell you that I have contracted some debts. It behoves me, therefore, in taking a wife, to be fully assured of the means of supporting her in the style which she has every right to expect."

"I agree with you; the more especially as Hilda will prove, I fear, a rather expensive wife. She is naturally what people call open-handed, and she has literally no idea of the value of money. Born to wealth, and accustomed to a lavish expenditure, she would, I am sure, be very unhappy if forced to stint or parsimony—though she actually believes, foolish child! that she could be happy with you in a cottage. Carefully as she has been brought up, she has somehow imbibed foolish notions about love, and roses, and singing-birds, and books, and music—an ideal paradise, in which the flowers never fade, and the skies are never clouded, and paint and paper never require to be renewed, and rent and taxes and servants' wages are unknown, and clothes never wear out or grow shabby, and an elegant dinner appears every day without cost or trouble! a bower of bliss, in fact, into which care and anxiety can never intrude; that is Hilda's innocent conception of love in a cottage, with an income considerably less than she spends now on dress and ornaments."

"Youth's fair dream, my dear madam ! Why should we disturb it ? Why jar on the poetry of a pure and innocent heart ? Why intrude vulgar realities on the tender romance of one so young and lovely ? Hilda is so sweet as she is, I would not for worlds do or say aught which could alter her ever so little. Ah ! sooner or later troubles will come, experience will dissipate the sweet glamour of young life's beliefs and trusts. Let us leave her to her girlish dreams. I, for my part, will do all I can to prevent her from being rudely awakened. As my wife, she shall never, if I can help it, know what care and sorrow mean. The world shall be to her more beautiful year by year. Her life shall be, if I can make it so, one long, bright summer's day. But, in order to do this, I must look keenly after our mutual interests ; while she dreams her lovely dreams I must tackle stern realities. In plain terms, I must know exactly how much we shall have to live upon ; and, therefore, I deem it only prudent to seek an interview with Major Capel. Hilda must not miss any luxury to which she has been accustomed, and a married woman naturally looks to spend more than she has done in her maiden estate."

Then Hilda came back, and Mrs. Mowbray, in her turn, departed. They had no engagement till quite late in the evening, and Mr. Trelawny, of course, was to dine with them *en famille*. After a while, Horace proposed that he and Hilda should take a stroll in Kensington Gardens, and thither, accordingly, they went, after an early cup of tea, eschewing for once the conventionalities of the Ring and Row. It was a lovely day, not too hot, when the evening breezes began to blow freshly through the wooded glades and alleys of the Gardens, and Hilda, happy as a young queen, sauntered along with her handsome, courtly lover, as supremely content as any village maiden with her rustic sweetheart. They were walking under the trees, with the large pond before them, the sunset light falling brightly on the clear, calm waters, and the silence broken only by the distant hum from the park, when Hilda stopped and shivered.

"What is it, dearest ?" asked Horace, tenderly.

"Oh, nothing ! One of those queer shivers that go

through one sometimes. I am not superstitious, but I think that perhaps a ghost crosses one's path, for the chill is mental as well as physical, while it lasts."

"Nonsense, my Hilda; the chill means that you have taken a cold. It has been a very warm day, and now a cool breeze comes from the water. Let us get away from the trees; the sun can seldom penetrate this umbrageous foliage; perhaps the ground is damp." And he led her away into more open space, where the sun had shone all day, and further from the pool. They stood for a while looking at the red walls of the old palace. In after days, when Hilda recalled that hour and its surroundings, she always saw the great, low, rambling building, with its dull, red walls, its stacks of chimneys, and its many windows glistening in the sunset; she saw the long vista of the Broad Walk, the double rows of leafy trees, the spreading chestnuts, the solemn elms, and, between the lower branches, the shimmering waters of the pool. As she looked at them then, leaning on the strong arm that was to help and lead her all through life's journey, she scarcely saw these things. The sombre palace, the overspreading foliage, the well-trodden sward, the glittering pond and stream were all familiar. She had known them all her life, and they were as adjuncts of her home, from which, as she supposed—if she thought at all about it—she could never be widely or continuously separated. But when they were miles away, and gates of brass and barriers of iron had risen up between her and Horace Trelawny, she remembered that calm, trustful hour—the last of calm, the last of perfect trust. And lo! the scene was photographed, with its every line and curve, and light and shadow, on the tablets of a mournful, too faithful memory.

"It is time to go home," said Hilda, waking as from a reverie. "I shall dress for the evening when I dress for dinner, so I have not too much time at my disposal. Do you go with us to the Dusautoy's to-night?"

"I think not, love. I am not invited; and I mean to start for Paris early to-morrow morning."

"And it is scarcely right to publish our engagement till we have papa's express consent. I have no fear of his

withholding it, but I think we ought not to appear as a betrothed couple till we really have it. And how do I know that the Earl of Camelford will receive me as a daughter?"

"No doubt of that, my Hilda. His lordship knew of my attachment more than a fortnight ago; I told him when we were *tête-à-tête* over our wine after dinner, and for answer he tossed off a glass of our choicest St. Persy, exclaiming, 'Here's to your successful wooing, my boy! The sooner Miss Capel is Mrs. Trelawny the better shall I be pleased.' I only hope your father will be equally complacent. Tell me, Hilda, will you be faithful to me, in case he should demur, or even reject my suit? in case the course of our true love should not run smoothly?"

"Horace, I will always be faithful to you! I will never love you less than I do now. I dare not say I would marry you in opposition to papa's command, but I would never marry any one else—never let any other hand rest in mine as yours is resting now. A woman only loves once, Horace, but it is for ever. However, we need not disquiet ourselves with ugly possibilities. I feel quite confident of papa's approval. I know very little about him personally, for, curiously enough, I have not seen him more than half-a-dozen times since mamma died; but he has never yet refused a request of mine, nor denied me what I wished. He always says in his letters, 'Please yourself, my darling Hilda, and you will please me.' And as you have auntie's good word, I am positive he will receive you with open arms."

"And you really will not have my ring till I return?"

"No; I think still I will not. You shall put it on when you come back with papa's unqualified consent. Then I will wear it proudly, dear Horace. What sort of ring is it?"

"I have several for you to choose from. Will you have diamonds alone, or diamonds and some other stone—say opals?"

"*Opals!* Oh, no, dear. I would not be engaged with an opal ring for the universe! We should never be married."

"Superstitious little darling! Will emeralds do, then?"

"No, no! Emeralds are not lucky. If you gave me emeralds you would marry me, and soon cease to love me—that would be worse than anything!"

"Undoubtedly! Hilda, I had no notion you were such a fatalist. Are you thinking of the silly rhyme?—

"Green is forsaken,
And yellow's forsown,
And blue is the sweetest
Colour that's worn.'"

"I never heard it; but I have heard and read a great deal about the virtues of divers precious stones, and I will never take either opals or emeralds as a gift. When I want them I will buy them for myself. No; give me diamonds, or rubies, or sapphires, or turquoises, or pearls, anything rather than opals and emeralds; and I have no fancy for amethysts. I rather like aqua-marines, though; or what do you say to an antique? Clara de Vaux had a lovely cameo for her engagement ring. I think I should like something quite out of the common way."

"And you shall have it, dearest, if it can be bought with money. I will see what I can find in Paris; I know a jeweller in the Rue de la Paix who deals largely in antiques. Now let us hasten home."

But the antique was never bought; no circlet of diamonds or rubies was ever placed by Horace on Hilda's "engaged finger."

It was growing dusk when they entered the house, and the servants were busy lighting the gas in the hall and on the landings.

"Is my aunt in the drawing-room?" asked Hilda of one of them as she passed.

"No, ma'am," was the reply; "my mistress is in the library with a gentleman whom I do not know."

"Did he not give his name?"

"Oh! yes, ma'am; but he said he was altogether a stranger to Mrs. Mowbray. I do not think my mistress would have seen him, had he not said he came from Paris on urgent private business of Major Capel's."

"Urgent private business!" repeated Hilda, and she turned rather pale. "Something is the matter, Horace."

"Nay, my love; your father may send a special mes-

senger on private business without any calamity having happened. Though it may be that some busybody has prematurely informed him of my attentions to yourself—for I never sought to disguise them—and he is offended."

"It may be, but I think not. In such case he would have written, or come himself. This man brings bad news, whatever it is—I feel it. Oh, I wish he would go away, that I might know all about it! How horrible is suspense! I cannot dress till I have seen aunt, and ascertained that all is right. Let us go into the morning-room, and wait there till we hear the stranger go."

"As you like, my love; but I would strongly advise you to occupy yourself with your toilet; the time will pass more quickly. After all, I dare say nothing whatever has occurred—nothing, that is, to cause you any distress. Will you not take my counsel?"

"I cannot; I must wait. I feel such an oppression at my heart! I felt the same when that shiver came over me by the pool."

"My dear Hilda, I hope you are not given to presentiments of evil. Nothing is more unwise than to anticipate sorrow; why should we meet trouble half-way?"

"Why, indeed, except that we cannot help ourselves! I wonder how long the man has been here? Why does not auntie send for me? She must have heard us come in."

They sat down in the morning-room, and Horace tried to soothe Hilda's fears, and to amuse her with the account of some curious adventures which had befallen him a year ago at Harrogate. And Hilda listened, and tried to feel interested; but the time passed on, the clocks in the house struck first the half and then the full hour; it grew quite dark, and still no word came from the library where Mrs. Mowbray sat closeted with the mysterious visitor. Even Horace, infected, perhaps, by Hilda's uneasiness, began to feel that all was not as it should be. Was it possible that the stranger's embassy had any connection with himself? Had Major Capel heard certain whispers which he had been most anxious to suppress? or did he think a coronet in prospective only, and estates heavily mortgaged, unworthy of the acceptance of his

lovely heiress? And it was current in Mayfair that Hilda Capel was not only the *belle*, but the heiress *par excellence* of the season. He, too, relapsed into silence, and listened dreamily to the faint noises in the well-ordered house, and the rattle of the carriages outside. By-and-by he could hear the jingle of glasses and plates, and he knew that the table was being laid in the dining-room. Then there came a street piano and drove him nearly crazy with its hackneyed "*Ah, che la morte!*" Hilda heard it, too—it was one of her favourite songs; but from that day forth she hated it, and fled from the room when any one sat down to sing it.

At length she grew restless, and proposed that they should adjourn to the drawing-room, and Horace willingly accompanied her. Here were lights and books and pictures, but in vain they made a show of occupying themselves. Ere long the first dinner-bell rang, and while Horace was again trying to persuade Hilda to summon her maid and dress for the evening, a servant entered with a message from his mistress. "Would Miss Capel and Mr. Trelawny kindly excuse her, and dine alone? She had received some painful tidings, and was not at all well."

"Dine alone!" exclaimed Hilda, almost indignantly, turning to her lover. "How does my aunt expect I can eat and drink and talk, after such a message? I will go at once to her."

"Have patience," said Horace, gently. Then, turning to the servant, "Is the gentleman gone?"

"Yes, sir; I let him out myself not many minutes since. Did you not hear the hall-door? it slipped from my fingers and slammed-to. I am very sorry, but the terrace-door was open, and the sudden draught did it."

"No, I heard nothing; there was such a clatter in the streets, and that detestable organ was droning away just under the window."

"Shall I tell them to serve the dinner, Miss Capel?"

"No! no! I must see my aunt. Come with me, Horace. Dinner, indeed! We are not entirely heartless, I hope."

The servant withdrew, and Horace still strove to dis-

suade Hilda from going to her aunt. He now fully shared her apprehensions. "Painful tidings," the servant had said. It was very evident that some catastrophe had occurred. Finding Hilda resolute, he led her to the threshold of the library, then paused, saying, "But what right have I to intrude? This is, doubtless, a family affair."

"And you are one of us now," she answered, clinging to him. She trembled from head to foot as she spoke, standing outside that door which alone separated her from she knew not what terrible revelation. She gently turned the handle and entered, still with Horace's arm encircling her.

Mrs. Mowbray sat at the table, her face buried in her hands. She raised her head as the young people entered, faintly exclaiming, "Oh, why did I forget to lock the door?" Never did Hilda forget the look of horror which her aunt's pale countenance wore. She was still in her elegant morning-dress; the roses in her cap seemed a mockery, contrasted with her altered features and colourless complexion. So great a change had passed over her since their parting with smiles and light words several hours before, that Horace thought he could scarcely have recognised his handsome *débonnaire* hostess, had he come upon her accidentally. Her face, her expression, even her movements, told them that she had just sustained some fearful shock. She stared at Hilda as if frozen into stone, and did not speak.

"Oh, aunt! what is it? what is it?" wailed the girl, terrified at what she saw. "Oh, what has happened? what did that dreadful man want with you? Is my father dead?"

"Yes."

The answer was groaned out, rather than spoken. Hilda stood aghast, but tearless; Horace drew her tenderly towards him, but she put away his arm, and walked straight up to Mrs. Mowbray, and laid her hand upon her shoulder.

"Aunt," she said, in a low, hoarse voice—oh, how unlike the gay, silvery tones of the morning!—"how was it? You must tell me all."

"Do not ask, I pray you; for your own sake ask no more," replied Mrs. Mowbray, with a shudder.

But Hilda persisted. "I *must* know, aunt. I have a right to know all that you know; I am my father's daughter. Nay! I shall go mad, if you try to keep me in ignorance."

But still Mrs. Mowbray's only reply was—"Oh, my God, how shall I tell her? Oh, my God! help me, help me! and help this unhappy child!"

Never before had Hilda heard her aunt call upon that holy name. No mention of God was ever made in that house. His aid, His guidance, was never invoked, unless it were, perhaps, by some poor servant in the garrets of the noble mansion. No song of praise ever ascended to Him who gave them, day by day, comfort and plenty, without stint. No voice of thanksgiving went up at the midnight hour for "all the blessings of the light." No one said, "Oh, God, *my* God, great is Thy loving-kindness; Thy mercies are numberless!" But in the first moment of distress, the trembling spirit turned to Him, imploring help and consolation. Too true are the poet's words:

"Ay, sooth, we feel too strong in weal to need Thee on the road;
But woe being come, the soul is dumb that crieth not on God."

Hilda stood like one stupefied. Her father was *dead!* Her aunt had said so; what worse could there be to tell? At last she whispered, her blood freezing as she spoke, "*Was he murdered?*"

"No, no!" was Mrs. Mowbray's low answer. "Better if it were so."

"Then he died by his own hand?"

"Yes."

There was a dead silence in the room; they neither moved nor spoke, those horror-stricken three, while the timepiece on the mantelshelf ticked audibly, and Hilda's Java sparrows, aware of her presence, began to peck at the bars of their gilded cage. Hours, rather than minutes, seemed to pass while that heavy stillness lasted. It was Horace who spoke first: "Hilda, let me take you to your room."

She shook her head. "No, no! let me hear how it was. Why did he do it?"

"Spare me a little," asked Mrs. Mowbray; "I must

gain strength; I must tell you *alone*; Hilda, I cannot speak while Horace is with us. Tell him to leave us now; he cannot help us."

"Dear Mrs. Mowbray, is there nothing I can do for you—for Hilda? Only tell me how I may serve you."

"There is nothing to be done, *now!* The greatest kindness you can show us is to leave us alone together."

"Very well; I will go, then. If you need me, you know where to send; I will be with you early to-morrow morning. Good night, my poor Hilda."

Hilda rather wondered that he went. She felt that nothing could have tempted her from Horace's side were he in deep affliction. Almost unconsciously she had counted upon him staying to share her sorrow with her. But then Mrs. Mowbray had bidden him go—he had no alternative.

"Now, aunt, tell me," she said, when the hall door had shut upon her lover. "We are alone now, and I am strong to hear what must be told. Hide nothing, I implore you. My father has committed suicide. Why did he do it?"

"Because he was *ruined*, Hilda! He was a gamester and a spendthrift; he was never so rich as was imagined—as he always represented himself to be. He lost everything—everything! even his honour; and you and I are beggars!"

"A gamester! You and I are beggars—*beggars!* Can it be true? I cannot understand. Beggars! Am I not an heiress?"

"Unhappy child, you are heiress to poverty and shame."

"To poverty, perhaps," replied Hilda, proudly; "but to shame?—oh, surely not!"

"You are the daughter of a suicide, and a dishonoured man. Now you know why I could not speak before Horace Trelawny; from this hour, Hilda, you may bid him farewell—he will never marry you now."

"Horace loves *me*," answered Hilda, in a voice of quiet scorn. "He sought *me*—Hilda Capel, not the heiress, who perhaps never really existed. He loves *me*, aunt, and he will not desert *me*. I would be faithful to him,

though his father were a condemned criminal, though all friends showed him the cold shoulder, though he had to work as an artisan or a field-labourer for his living. And he will be faithful to me. *He loves me*, I tell you. Can a man forsake the woman he truly loves?"

"Many a man has forsaken a woman whom he once vowed to love. And since you like plain speaking, Hilda, I tell you frankly that no one—not I, myself—can blame Horace Trelawny for withdrawing from the engagement. He must marry money—he as good as told me so this morning; and you are penniless, and your name disgraced. No one of all your admirers would marry you now. I would have spared you, but, since you are so brave, it is better to tell the truth."

"Far better! But, aunt, if Horace Trelawny fail me now, if he is what you think he is, I will never more trust mortal man. I do not think my heart will break—I wish it would; but no more wretched, hopeless creature will ever darken God's sunshine than Hilda Capel."

"You will not hesitate to release Horace? As an honourable woman you *must*."

"As an honourable woman I must, and I shall; but it remains to be seen whether he will be so released. Were circumstances reversed, I should cling to him the closer; I would not be dismissed."

"Poor child! I did not know you cared so deeply for this young man. Do not deceive yourself; all is over between you."

Hilda shivered, and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, my God!" she murmured, "and I was so happy this morning—only this morning! What have I done that I should suffer such terrible reverse?"

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOWS DEEPEN.

"Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils : for wherein is he to be accounted of?"

"And there's a lust in man no charm can tame,
Of loudly publishing our neighbour's shame ;
On eagle's wings immortal scandals fly,
While virtuous actions are but born and die."

HILDA did not see Horace when he called next morning. Worn out with excitement, grief, and a restless night—the first she had ever known—she awoke late, and found on inquiring that he had only seen a servant, and, having desired his compliments to the ladies, gone away, leaving word that he would call again later in the day. It was close upon noon when Hilda sent her almost untasted breakfast away. Mrs. Mowbray had told her maid to say that she had suffered all night from an excruciating headache, and was now, she thought, inclined to sleep, and did not wish to be disturbed. And she would like to know how Miss Capel was, and advised her to lie down quietly, and rest, if she could, for of course no one would be admitted.

Lying down quietly was out of the question. As the slow hours wore on, and Horace did not reappear, Hilda paced the darkened rooms, too weary and too miserable to do aught else, and yet too restless to remain many minutes in one place. Even the weather had changed its gracious mood; a sad-toned, eerie wind moaned and whistled among the trees in Kensington Gardens, a low, leaden-hued mass of clouds rained persistently, now falling drip, drip on the leads, now beating fiercely against the window panes behind the blinds. Once her own maid interrupted her; the girl was deeply distressed on her young mistress's account, though she knew but half the truth, having heard only, with the other servants, that Major Capel had died in Paris, and that his death was "awful sudden!"

"Now do'ee have a little bit of luncheon, Miss Capel, dear," said the girl pleadingly, as she looked at Hilda's face, so colourless, and wan, and sharpened, and aged, it seemed since last evening. The soft, grey eyes were dull and heavy with the tears they could not shed, and round them were dark livid circles; the sweet mouth was drawn into hard lines of pain, the whole aspect of the unhappy young lady was totally changed; she was like a flower in its first bloom beaten down by a fierce and sudden tempest of hail and rain, its beauteous petals torn and stained, its stem bent and bruised, and all its loveliness defaced. "Now do have just a biscuit and a glass of wine, Miss Capel," still urged the kindly maid. "Deary me, ma'am! and you are as cold as ice—and no wonder, such a day! a north wind howling, and the rain coming down in bucketsful! Let me light a fire in your own room, and I'll cover you over with the down-quilt, and perhaps you'll go to sleep after you've had some wine. Any way, I'll light the gas, the drawing-rooms are as dark as night."

"No, no! thank you, Patty," replied Hilda. "I like the darkness best, and I cannot lie down, and I cannot drink wine; it would choke me. Leave me, please; I am best alone. I suppose Mr. Trelawny has not called since morning?"

"He has not, ma'am; he said he would, but it has turned out such a day, you see; and it's not late yet—it's only three o'clock."

"I thought it must be seven, at least," said Hilda, wearily. "I seem to have been here hours and hours."

"If Mr. Trelawny calls, will you receive him, ma'am?"

"Yes, bring him up at once. He will come presently; and let me know when my aunt is awake."

"Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Parrott is with her; as soon as she gives the signal, I'll go and see how the mistress is, and bring you word."

And Patty went away, saying to herself, "It's all very fine to make the weather an excuse, but if I had a sweetheart, and I was in such trouble as my young lady is, I should expect him to come to me, even if it rained cats

and dogs and church-steeples, as the saying is! And missis shuts herself up, and leaves her all alone, and it's more Miss Capel's trouble than missis's, any way. I never did fancy Mr. Trelawny myself; he never seemed to me half good enough for Miss Capel. Well! I think I'll put light to her fire; it's dreadful cold for summer—it's more like the end of October; she will be glad of a little warmth presently; and I'll ask Mr. Edwards to give me a glass of that fine old wine he talks about, and I'll set it on the table in the large drawing-room and say nothing, and may be she'll drink it up without thinking. She must have walked miles since she began to pace up and down after the breakfast that she didn't eat; she will be exhausted soon."

And good little Patty carried out her kind intentions. She lighted Hilda's fire, and drew the sofa up to the hearth, and made the room all ready for its occupant. And then she went to the butler, and told him her trouble, and he gladly brought out the wine she asked for, and praised her for her thoughtfulness, and pitied poor Miss Capel. But he, too, wondered that Mr. Trelawny had not returned.

"For," said Edwards, "what's wind and rain to a healthy young man like him? Besides, he's got his own cab, and his chambers are not far off. Ah! Patty, my girl, lovers are not what they did use to be in my young days. I'd have gone through fire, much less water, for my Mary in our courting-days; and if she'd been in trouble, I'd have gone to her through a Noah's deluge, or been drowned in the attempt. And Miss Capel is a fine match for any man; he did ought to be right proud of her. And now, I suppose she'll step right into her fortune, which they do say is—*immense*, now that her poor pa's taken off so sudden. Ah! these sudden deaths are warnings to us, Patty, my girl; we don't know who'll go next! and there's been a *death-watch* in my pantry these three weeks past."

"And I dreamt of a wedding night before last, and that always foretells a funeral," said Patty, mournfully, as she walked away.

And all the while Hilda was still pursuing her weary walk, and saying, "Will he come? will he come? does

he know? has he heard what I am—no heiress, but a beggar?—a beggar! It seems impossible; but aunt said so. When I awoke this morning I thought at first it must be all a horrible dream; it is not though—it is all true, all true! Oh, if it were but a dream! If I could but awake and find that I had dreamt it all, and that things still are as they were yesterday morning! Yesterday morning! why, that seems ages back—years ago! another life that has passed away! Is there not an old Greek story about the Fates, the *Parcae*—one of whom sat always with a pair of scissors in her hand, ready at any moment to cut short the thread of human life? Surely, some fate cut mine short off yesterday! There are more ways of ending one's life than by dying, though I never guessed at it till to-day. Why does not Horace come? Oh! my dear, my dear, my own love, I would have flown to you in your misery had death and hell stood in my way! But how impatient I am! He will be here presently, and all will be right. I can cry when I feel his arms round me again, and the pain—the dull, heavy pain—will go out of my poor head when I can lay it on his faithful heart, and be at rest. Horace, why don't you come? You are all I have left; but having you, I can bear everything, and be happy."

And the dreary day deepened into early night in the silent, darkened house, and still he came not. Worn out at length, Hilda threw herself on a couch, drew a sofa-rug over her, and fell asleep. She was awoke by the sound of voices, and when she opened her eyes the gas was lighted, and Horace and her aunt sat facing each other on the other side of the room, and she heard the former say, "Does she know it all?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Mowbray; "she knows that she has not a penny in the world which she can call her own; she knows that her vaunted heiress-ship was all a delusion, a mere myth, though it was no fault of hers, poor child. And I cannot think what is to become of her, for I am ruined utterly, and shall have enough to do to keep my own head above water. But she does not, and need not, know what a wretch her father was. A dissolute, profligate *roué*! and as dishonest and dishonourable

as profligate. Why the Government never pounced down upon him I cannot conceive."

"Did you never suspect this?" asked Horace, gravely. "Had you no idea that Major Capel was a fashionable blackleg, a cheat, a skilled deceiver—nothing more?"

"I cannot say I had no suspicions of late. There were some things I could not account for; but up to a very recent period money came in freely. I had *carte-blanche* in everything. I was told to keep up the establishment here in a style befitting Hilda's position and prospects, to spare nothing on her personally, and—" Mrs. Mowbray was going to add "and to marry her at the close of her first season!" For such had been her instructions; but she thought better of it. There was still a hope, though a very faint one, that Horace *might* care enough for Hilda herself to take her, in spite of all, and without even the ghost of a fortune. But it was such a forlorn hope that Mrs. Mowbray could have laughed at herself for being so absurd as to entertain it, even for a moment. *Still!* being a very prudent woman, and exceptionally worldly-wise, she thought it quite as well that Mr. Trelawny should not know that she, at least, encouraged his advances, because he was the most eligible of all her niece's admirers, and because it was a part of the programme that she was to be married out of hand! Horace shook his head, almost sternly. He felt that he had been deceived, and at the moment he included Hilda herself in the deception. The poor girl did not see his face, for hers was still buried in the cushion; but the tone of his voice told her that he was cold, calculating, and suspicious. She longed to rise and speak, but something like a dreadful nightmare seemed to keep her motionless, and almost breathless, listening to every word; and half she wondered if she were delirious, and half she pitied herself, as if it were some one else for whom she was so sorry, and a voice, like the slow tolling of a bell, seemed to say, "Poor Hilda! Poor, unhappy Hilda!"

Then she either swooned, or slept the dead sleep of exhaustion, she did not know which, and later she awoke to see her aunt bending over her with some *sal volatile*

and lavender. She swallowed it to escape importunity, and then Mrs. Mowbray said, "Mr. Trelawny is here, will you see him now?"

"Yes, I will see him. The sooner it is all over the better."

And as Mrs. Mowbray left the room, Hilda rose, and seated herself in a chair, as she did so arranging her hair and her dress. "I am glad I took that nasty stuff," she murmured; "at least it gives me a brief, fictitious strength, and I must be true to myself now, if ever. What though my father was all they say! what though they made me, all unwittingly, an impostor; I am still Hilda Capel, I am still myself, and I have done nothing to be ashamed of."

She was quite calm and collected when Horace noiselessly entered the room, and, taking both her hands in his, said gently, "My poor Hilda." A ray of hope revisited her. She had fully made up her mind to stand henceforth alone, as separate from Horace as though the grave divided them; but to find him still loving, still faithful, would be such a comfort that she thought she could be comparatively happy, though not for worlds would she avail herself of his generosity. "You know all," she said quietly, though almost in a whisper.

"I know all," he responded; "and, Hilda, believe me when I say I hold *you* blameless."

Blameless! This was not quite what she expected. Of course, she was blameless; but was that all that he could say for her? "I am not responsible for the faults of—of him who is gone," she said, gravely, her gleam of hope fading as she spoke. "I thought I was what people said I was. I knew no more; I never questioned my position—how could I? Till last night I could have sworn there was not in all the world a tithe of the misery and falsehood which has been revealed to me since you and I, happy and unconscious of evil, entered this house after our pleasant ramble. But I am very sorry, Horace—sorry that you should, through me, have been so deluded. There is but one course to pursue. I give you back your promise. Our short love-dream is at an end; our brief, unannounced engagement is over; all that was between

us is as if it had never been ; every vow, every pledge is cancelled, and henceforth we are strangers."

She stopped suddenly, and there was a dead silence in the room. "It is best so," he said at last. "It breaks my heart to say it, but it is best so. Fate has been very cruel to us. You are a noble girl, Hilda, and Heaven will reward you for the sacrifice. We could never marry now; you must see that as well as I. Therefore, for your sake, as well as for mine, it is best that we should part. It would be madness to persist in an engagement which would be only a mockery to us both; it would be torture to meet—and, perhaps—who knows?—come to exchange mutual reproaches."

"I should never reproach you; I do not now. And you shall never have cause to reproach me either, for I give you back your freedom, as freely as I gave you the love for which you sued the other day. There are no presents to be returned. I am so glad I did not wear your ring! I have a note or two of yours, which I will burn; and you have, I suppose, a few words of mine, which you can do with as you please. There is nothing that I could be ashamed of, but it would be more honourable if you destroyed them. That is all. We have only now to exchange farewells. Be happy."

"Hilda, I feel like a wretch for giving you up like this. You must despise me."

"You are not what I thought you to be, and I shall nevermore believe in man's affection; but I do not say I despise you—at least, not now. I may feel contempt for your conduct some day, when I am able to review it impartially and dispassionately, which I cannot at present."

"But you must perceive that I have no alternative. I cannot help myself. I cannot marry a dowerless wife. Our family estates are heavily burdened; and—I—I have run the race of most young fellows in my rank of life. I have sown some wild oats, I confess; and I am deeper in debt than I like to think of."

"And you meant to pay your debts, and to sustain the family fortunes, with my reputed wealth. I am sorry to have disappointed you so cruelly. It was not my fault——"

"We were neither of us in fault," burst in Horace, with passion in his tone, and tears in his eyes. "I could rave when I think of the wickedness of those who deceived us both. A thousand curses—"

"Hush! No curses, I entreat. Let the dead past be dead. All is over; the wrong is beyond remedy. Let us say good-bye. Why prolong the pain of this interview?"

"It seems so cruel to leave you while your affliction is so recent."

"It would be still more cruel to stay, now that our separation is decreed. Sharpest remedies are kindest, often. Once more, farewell; for since I cannot send you away, I will go myself."

"Will you not give me one kiss, Hilda—one last kiss?"

She did not repulse him as he extended his arms, and once more she was clasped to the heart which she had so fondly, vainly trusted. She kissed him gravely, solemnly, like one who takes an eternal farewell, and he felt as though dying lips touched his. Another moment, and she was gone, and he walked slowly out of the house, and into the lamp-lit, desolate, wet park, saying to himself, "Poor Hilda! I feel like a brute, but she set me free herself. What could I do? I could not marry a beggar, and, worse still, a girl with a name that is spoken only to be reviled. That wretched Major seems to have been as veritable a rascal and blackguard as ever lived; and when the mine at last exploded, and his swindle was exposed, he must need go and send a bullet through his brains! Well, I don't know, though, what better he could have done. He would have been in prison ere this, I suppose, with the galleys before him. Not a pleasant prospect for a fashionable, luxurious, middle-aged dandy, with expensive tastes—a connoisseur in wines and cigars, and fond of pictures, statues, horses, and all that sort of thing. Strange that the bubble did not burst before; he was an uncommonly lucky dog to be able to keep up the game so long. My poor Hilda! She is a splendid girl; I had no idea she had so much in her. Let her good-for-nothing father be what he may, she, at least, is all that the most fastidious fellow could desire. How lovely she looked yesterday! Yes, *she*, at least, is true and pure and

noble, with the spirit of an empress. My poor, lost Hilda!"

And then Horace bethought himself that he must write to his father, and he had better get home as quickly as possible, for the rain, which had ceased awhile, was recommencing, and where was the good of running the risk of influenza and rheumatism! He would go home and dine, and see if he could not drown his cares in sparkling wine.

It was years before Horace Trelawny and Hilda Capel met again.

By all the rules of novel writing, I ought to have to tell that Hilda was found insensible after Horace's departure, that a dangerous illness ensued, and that she lay for days between life and death. But it was not so. Sufferers in real life have not always the poor comfort of relapsing into unconsciousness, when thought becomes torture and remembrance sorest pain. They are not invariably struck down and laid upon a bed of sickness, fever-stricken and delirious, all-forgetful of the cruel blow that has smitten almost to the death. For several days it did seem as if this were to be Hilda's fate, for all her restlessness was gone, and a dull sense of misery pressed heavily on heart and brain. With her adieu to Horace her strength seemed to fail her, and when the next morning came, with lulled winds and returning sunshine, she did not attempt to rise. She was not ill, she said, only so tired and stupid, and her head ached, and when she tried to stand she was weak and giddy; she would stay in bed till she felt stronger.

And so they let her be; and Mr. Seeley, Mrs. Mowbray's man of business—and the late Major Capel's also—came and went, and the servants wondered whether anything was amiss, as the lawyer looked so grave; and the mistress—usually so easy and even-tempered—seemed worried, cross, and altogether miserable. They thought rightly that the Major's death alone would never have affected her thus. And Mrs. Parrott, who had guessed at something of the truth, said to the butler, in a moment of mutual confidence, "My private opinion is, Mr. Edwards, that the Major's not only gone, but taken his

money with him ! And from a word or two my lady let fall in her first distress, I've a notion that he went of his own accord—without marching orders, you understand."

"Not likely," said Mr. Edwards ; "many a gentleman as lives too freely is took off suddenly in middle-life, and I did hear there was cholera in Paris. As for his money, everybody knows he was one of the richest gentlemen going, and, of course, all he had comes to our Miss Hilda. Bless her, pretty dear ! she do take her pa's death to heart. And what's become of that fine young spark that seemed to worship the very ground she trod on not a week ago ? Where's Mr. Trelawny, I say ? "

"Oh ! it's not proper to be courting and a death in the family, and the mistress is very particular."

But for all that, both butler and lady's-maid had their own convictions, which too soon amounted to certainties. At the end of a week Hilda came down stairs, looking wretchedly thin, and white, and listless ; but she said she was quite well again, she only wanted a little fresh air to make her stronger, and to give her an appetite.

"She was the ghost of her old self," Patty declared, and she did wish Mr. Trelawny would come back again. Surely there could be no impropriety in his coming and going, though, of course, general visitors could not be received. But all the other upper-servants knew by this time that Major Capel had committed suicide, after repeated heavy losses at the gaming-table, and that he was more than suspected of practices which stamped him as a blackleg ; that had he lived, he would have been ignominiously scouted from the society of gentlemen. Mr. Edwards read the newspapers, and imparted his knowledge to Mrs. Parrott, and Mrs. Parrott told the coachman, with whom she was about to "form an alliance," according to her own account ; and they all began to wonder whether Miss Capel would have any fortune at all, and whether Mrs. Mowbray would continue her present expensive establishment, and finally, whether their own wages—some of which were in arrears—would be paid in full. A few notes of condolence came from friends, but they were very few, and vaguely and formally worded. How could it be otherwise ? It was difficult to know what

to say under such painful—some people said such *disgraceful*—circumstances. And Mrs. Mowbray had not many real friends. The mere woman of the world may have a large and brilliant circle, and many seeming intimates, but *friends* who may be trusted and depended on, come weal, come woe, she very seldom has the happiness to possess. As for Hilda, she was pitied more or less sincerely; but no one thought of comforting her, far less of helping her, supposing she needed help. And a few *very* virtuous ladies shook their heads when her name was mentioned, and whispered that they had always thought there was something rather strange about her, and she must have had some knowledge of her father's source of income! *must have known* that she was taking a position to which she was not entitled, spending extravagantly the Major's ill-gotten gains, and associating with persons of unblemished reputation under false pretences!

Hilda knew nothing of these uncharitable comments, and had she known would not have greatly cared. A person who is suffering the extremest agonies of *tidoloreux* is scarcely cognisant of pin-pricks; nor can one in extremity of grief, bowed down with heaviest and irremediable sorrow, take much heed of the careless world's vain blame or foolish praise.

There are few low-class ruffians who do not count it an ignoble action to strike a fallen foe—to kick a man when he is down! But there are many so-called Christian ladies and gentlemen—*ladies*, especially, I fear—who do not hesitate cruelly to stab, with bitter and scornful words, a fallen *friend*. When shall we learn that, of all graces, charity is the greatest, the most Divine?—the charity that is kind, that “*thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity*.” When true charity and true brotherly love pervade the whole Christian Church, then will the Millennium at once set in, and the reign of the saints commence.

And still Mr. Seeley paid his visits, and held long private conversations with Mrs. Mowbray, and Hilda wondered what they could find to talk about. Strange to say, it had not yet occurred to her to think practically of her future. They would have to keep fewer servants,

perhaps ; they might have to content themselves with the old brougham and one horse, and she could no longer have *carte-blanche* at sundry Court milliners and dressmakers now that she could contribute little or nothing to their united expenses. But, doubtless, when her poor father's affairs were wound up—she had somehow caught the phrase—*something* would remain, on which, with economy, she could dress herself, and pay her own private expenses, and auntie, she supposed, was very well off, though she really did not know.

And even these thoughts were vague and shadowy, floating, as it were, in her mind without shape, and without coherence. She thought her cup of bitterness was full to overflowing. She did not know that fresh trials were awaiting her—that still another ingredient, as yet untasted, was being added to the nauseous draught, in which her trembling lips were already steeped.

Mrs. Mowbray was saying to the lawyer : “ To-morrow, then, I must make Hilda understand that all is to be given up, and that I am leaving England, and cannot possibly take her with me.”

CHAPTER IV.

A HOLLOW WORLD.

“I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano;
A stage, where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.”

“ Why let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep ;
So runs the world away.”

It seemed as if the weather darkened in sympathy with Hilda's fortunes. Though it was by no means autumn yet, the summer had suddenly taken flight, frequent heavy showers chilled the air, the sun withdrew himself

behind the leaden-coloured clouds, and the wind whistled eerily about the stately mansions of Kensington Gore. The season was at an end. Parliament was getting through its business as fast as possible, in anticipation of the Ministerial whitebait dinner; and people were thronging out of town, in spite of daily wind and rain, hoping that things might be different in the country.

"It is so dreary! so dreary!" said poor Hilda, as she looked out on the wet, wind-tossed trees, and the muddy road below. She was sitting in her own room, beside a blazing fire, and though she wore a warm cashmere dressing-gown, she shivered. She felt always cold now, always tired, always sad and listless. The luncheon bell rang, and she went down without making any toilet. She was quite sure that no one would drop in, as in the old time, that seemed so very far away, though her mourning was not a fortnight old. She was not even sure of seeing her aunt, for Mrs. Mowbray remained now, as a rule, in her own apartments till dinner-time, retiring for the evening as soon as the meal was over. Once Hilda, longing for some relief from her sad thoughts, had ventured to take her crochet and offer to sit with her; but her aunt declined, on the plea of being too busy to talk. She had accounts to settle, and she could never make her figures add up unless she were quite alone. And there appeared to be some reason in what she said, for her desk, the table at which she sat, and a large basket at her side, overflowed with papers and little books, which looked like a sudden influx of tradesmen's accounts. Mrs. Mowbray made no explanation; she only requested politely, but very coldly, almost unkindly, Hilda thought, that she might not be interrupted.

And it was to-day as it had been yesterday and the day before. Mrs. Parrott came with the usual message—Her lady was very much engaged, and was not coming down to luncheon. Would Miss Capel be so good as to excuse her. "I must excuse her," thought Hilda, as she sat down in her accustomed place and helped herself to bread-and-butter; there was nothing else on the table, except some sweet biscuits and the remains of a stale Madeira cake. "It would be of no use if I sent word

that I particularly wanted to see her, she would not come; she cares nothing about me, one would think. Surely she is much changed since that dreadful evening ! changed as regards myself, I mean. She does not try to comfort me, though she knows that my heart is almost broken. She leaves me alone day after day ; it is nothing to her that I am wretched, ill, and solitary. And I always thought she cared for me. How many times has she declared that I was just the same as her own daughter, and that we were never to be quite separated—not even when I married. That will never be now—never ! Never again can I trust man's fond words. Nor do woman's words seem to be much more reliable, if I am to judge by friends, and by my aunt herself. Is the world all like this, I wonder ? Is there *nobody* true and faithful ? Is life really so hollow, so false, so disappointing ? And is society a mere *sham* ? —a heartless, miserable, disgusting *sham* ? And how bitterly cold it is ! There ought to be a fire ; we always have fires when the weather changes like this, whatever be the season. What has come to the servants, I wonder ? there is no one in attendance ! Not but what servants are a bore at luncheon, and I should have sent them away. Still, they ought not to take their dismissal for granted ; they ought to be here just at first, to know if anything is wanted. I think I will have a glass of sherry, this claret is not fit to drink, and I am so cold. There is none on the table ! ” And Hilda rang the bell somewhat impatiently. No fire, no soup, no wine but this sour, undrinkable claret, on this cold, miserable day—it was quite too bad !

It was several minutes before the bell was answered, and Hilda was about to ring again, when the door opened, and a young maid-servant, whose province hitherto had been altogether downstairs, made her appearance.

“ Did you ring, miss ? ”

“ Yes, I did. There is no wine on the table but stale, bad claret, a week old ; and there ought to be some soup. But why do you wait ? Where is Biggs ? ”

“ Biggs have gone away, miss, which he went last night, and so have Pritchard, and Sarah, and Mrs. Stoney, the head housemaid.”

Hilda said nothing, but the sudden exodus below stairs let in a gleam of most unwelcome light upon her mind. It was, as she had partly anticipated, then—they were about to *retrench*! Would they go and live on the Continent, or in the real country? She had heard of people living abroad in order to retrench, though she had never troubled herself as to the exact meaning of that most disagreeable process. Doubtless the house would be let for several years, and they—Mrs. Mowbray and herself—would have to do the best they could—put up with many inconveniences, wear old and unfashionable dresses, and make shift with one maid between them.

"Very well!" was the answer she gave the girl. "But tell Edwards to decant some sherry at once, and send it up."

"Yes, miss."

Some minutes elapsed, and Hilda was thinking how much she disliked the ways of inferior servants. No servant in that house had ever presumed to address her as "Miss" since she left the schoolroom. She had always been "Miss Capel," or "Ma'am." She had had literally no experience of the lower class of servants, who commonly persist in Miss-ing all unmarried ladies from sixteen to sixty. Of course it did not matter; but it was one of the straws before the wind, significant of the changes awaiting her, and she did not like it. At length the girl returned.

"Please, miss, Mr. Edwards say he have made an inventory of all the wine there is in the cellar, and no more isn't to be got up, the missis say."

"Oh, very well."

Hilda drank a glass of water, and felt as if it choked her. What did it all mean?

She was soon to know; she was soon to be as thoroughly enlightened as she could wish. Her aunt was even then preparing for the interview which had been postponed from day to day. She went back to her room, shivering with cold, and vexed and apprehensive. Did retrenching mean that they were to do without wine and soup? It was a word with a very elastic meaning, she began to be afraid. It might stretch itself no one could

tell how far; it might be stretched till life—existence, rather—became unendurable. She had a dim notion that she and her aunt would not in future get on together so well as heretofore. Poor Hilda! she little dreamed that they were not to “get on *together*” any more, that “getting on” in any shape was soon to be an individual and separate process. The luxurious firm of Mowbray and Capel was dissolved for ever.

Hilda heaped fresh coals on her fire, and was just settling herself in her favourite chair, with her feet upon the fender, when she heard a tap at the door. It was Parrott, looking strangely grim and sour. She had always made a great show of petting her young mistress, whom she shrewdly guessed to be the moneyed partner; but to-day she had the aspect of a person who has breakfasted on something highly indigestible, and lunched on vinegar.

“Miss Capel, your aunt requests you will go to her room immediately; she wants to speak to you.”

And, without waiting for an answer, she disappeared, slamming the door behind her.

“Now, then, I shall know,” thought Hilda. “I suppose it is better to ascertain the worst at once, though I thought a week ago I knew it but too well. There is more behind, it seems. Oh! but I could bear all, I could laugh at misfortune, if only—oh, Horace! Horace! how could you leave me in my misery!”

She paused a moment to dry the hot tears that sprang so readily to her eyes, and then hurried to obey the summons. She found Mrs. Mowbray still surrounded by books and papers, and she looked fagged and miserable, but she was evidently making herself comfortable. Her luncheon tray stood on a table near at hand; there was a well-cut raised pie of some sort, a solitary patty, a basket of fruit, and a decanter half full of ruby-coloured port. Hilda wondered whether that wine had been brought up before or after Edwards’ inventory was commenced. Evidently her aunt had no idea of lunching on bread-and-butter and cold water.

“Sit down, Hilda,” said Mrs. Mowbray, raising her black-bordered handkerchief to her eyes. “I have a great deal to say to you. Unhappy girl.”

"I am a *very* unhappy girl," was all Hilda's reply. There was something inexpressibly chilling and depressing in her aunt's tone and manner.

"I am very sorry for you, Hilda," began the lady, "and I have put off speaking to you till further delay is impossible. Still, I spoke plainly enough at first. As far as I remember, I said we were *beggars!*"

"You did say it, aunt, but I am afraid I did not understand. You could not mean it literally?"

"I did not mean that we must go into the street and sell lucifers, or exhibit white mice, or knock at doors with a petition, certainly. But I meant that all our money was gone, and that no more was forthcoming; that we—you especially—were really as destitute as people that get elected for asylums and almshouses. And what I said then, Hilda, I say now—for the fact must be faced—you *are* a beggar!"

"Have I nothing of my own?"

"Absolutely nothing, not a penny! The very dress you wear is not your own, strictly speaking, for it is not paid for, and never will be."

"Not paid for? I suppose not, because Madame always sends in her bills at Christmas, and not always then. But why will it *never* be paid for?"

"Have you the money to pay for it? for all your mourning, for all the dresses you have had this year, your Court-dress included? If you have, Madame's account is easily settled. Here it is."

It consisted of a good many sheets, each one headed with an ever-increasing "Brought forward." Hilda rapidly turned over the pages and glanced at the sum total. She was surprised and horrified, she could scarcely believe her eyes.

"It is out of all reason," she said, flushing as she spoke. "Madame must have charged exorbitantly—more than exorbitantly. It is impossible that so much is owing to her."

"Nevertheless, it is a fact. And looking over the items, I find that she has not charged at a higher rate than usual. Of course, her bill for you never amounted to nearly so much before; but last year you were in the schoolroom,

and your presentation-dress alone cost a small fortune. Your father desired that no expense should be spared, and he was obeyed. I told Madame that she was to do her *possible* for you, regardless of cost, and I believe you have no cause to complain. I do not think any girl was better dressed than yourself throughout the season."

"Some things have never been worn; perhaps Madame will take them back again."

"I should not wonder, as it is quite certain that she will never be paid for them."

"But, aunt, I cannot understand. Papa was not in business, and he had no pension, as some people have. He had a handsome income. He was *rich*; everybody said so. You said so yourself. You always told me I was an heiress, and need not bother myself about ways and means. Where, then, is all his money?" He could not take it with him. Is it that he died what people call intestate, and some one whom I do not know anything about claims all he had? Had he privately married any one? Have I a half-brother in France? I have read such things in novels."

"He certainly died intestate. His making a will would have been sheer folly, for he had nothing to will to you, to me, to anybody. Hilda, I thought you did understand. Your father, long ago, before your mother died, got through his patrimony—though I never knew that till the other day. He has lived for years, and so have you, on the proceeds of his iniquity. You said he was not in business, and apparently he was not; but he had a secret business—and it was *gambling*! And such gambling, Hilda, as is never practised among gentlemen. He was clever, and he was cautious, and he was fatally trusted. No doubt he was often on the brink of discovery—of ruin; yet something always saved him. He was what people call wonderfully *lucky*. But luck, after all, is a mere quicksand to build one's house upon. There came a day when his luck deserted him. His losses were tremendous, and, in a mad endeavour to recoup himself, he did something reckless, and his well-kept secret came to light. Yes; his shame was complete. It was a full exposure, and the world knew him for what he really was—a sharper, a liar, an unconvicted felon!"

"Hush, hush ! please don't ; I cannot bear it. He was my father, remember."

"I remember it but too well ; and it is necessary that you should know the truth. Then, when he found the game was up, and the police were on his track, he blew his brains out. I called him a coward for not staying to brave the consequences of his many crimes ; but, after all, I do not know that he is to be blamed. Escape was impossible. Like a cunning old fox as he was, he had run to cover for the last time, and the dogs were close at hand. To speak seriously, we should have been quite as much disgraced if he had lived, for his sentence would have been of the heaviest—the galley, or transportation for life !"

"My poor father !".

"Don't pity him, at least not in my hearing. When I think how I have been deceived, my blood boils with indignation. Let us speak no more of *him* ! I have told you the bare truth ; it is useless to go into particulars, and worse than useless, for the whole story from beginning to end is as black a one as was ever told. What we have to do is to consider ourselves ; we have to live—you have all your life before you."

"Would that I had not," moaned Hilda, in her misery. "I do not care to live ; I would sooner die."

"Young people always say that the first time real trouble touches them ; but they live, nevertheless, and, what is more, get reconciled to living—so much so, that if death comes their way and shakes his dart at them, they recoil with terror and dismay, and pray for longer life. I repeat that you have to live ! And that means to eat, to drink, to sleep, to dress ; involving a regular supply of food, and a table to sit down to, a bed to lie on, clothes to wear, and, of course, a roof to cover you. Where will you find all the necessities of respectable existence ?"

"Surely there must be something for me—if only a little ?"

"I tell you there is *nothing* !—not a single sixpence !"

"I could sell my jewels. There are a great many things I can do without, that I shall not want if I am to be a young lady no longer."

"Precisely; such as gold-topped scent-bottles, silver-backed brushes, inlaid trinket-cases! Yes, they will have to be sold, certainly—everything in the house, with a very few exceptions, must be sold; we have not the option of withholding them. But, Hilda, the money they fetch will not go into our pockets."

"Into whose, then?"

"Into those of our creditors. You are very simple for a girl turned eighteen; but I suppose you have heard of *creditors*?"

"Oh, yes! dreadful creatures—harpies, who think nothing of taking the very beds from under their miserable victims. But we have no creditors, have we?"

"Really, Hilda, I think you must be shamming simplicity! Did any of your governesses ever teach you the meaning—the practical meaning; never mind the etymology of the word—of the term '*creditor*'?"

"Creditors are people to whom money is owed."

"Just so; and as we owe a great deal of money, it follows that we have a tolerable supply of creditors, and some of them very angry ones, I fear."

"I begin to see! Things are not paid for, and we have no money to meet our bills."

"Carry your perceptions a little farther, my dear. At whose expense has this house been carried on, do you suppose?"

"At yours; you are the mistress."

"No; at yours. Had you not been in question, had not certain agreements existed between your father and myself, I should never have taken this house, any more than I should have rented Buckingham Palace. This expensive establishment has been kept up entirely for your benefit. I am responsible, unluckily, for everything has been in my name, and you are a minor; but to a large, a very large, extent, the debts which have been so contracted are yours, not mine."

"What can I do?" cried Hilda, piteously. "You say I have no money. I will sell everything, of course; but that will not be enough, I am afraid?"

"Not nearly enough; some of my private property must go. I have put the whole business into Mr.

Seeley's hands. He will make a composition with our creditors."

"What is that?"

"They will take all we have, and divide it among themselves; there will be law expenses, too; they will make the best of what they can get, and let the rest go."

"But *will* they? I have always heard that creditors are such dreadful creatures. Suppose they should put us in prison?"

"They will not do that; and let it comfort you to know they cannot, in any case, touch *you*! As for being 'dreadful,' if you got your living by selling bread, or meat, or drapery, I suppose you would want to be paid for the goods supplied?"

"I think I should. And *will* they *never* be paid?"

"Never! according to present appearances. It is continually happening, though," replied Mrs. Mowbray, complacently. "Tradesmen always allow for a certain amount of bad debts, and that is why their charges are so exorbitant."

"It is horrible. I feel like a thief."

"That is a foolish way of looking at it, and it will not help you to talk exaggerated moral sentiment. There are the debts, there are the creditors; they must make the best they can of it. Mr. Seeley will do the best he can for us."

"It is very good of him."

"Not in the least; it is always expected of the family lawyer; besides which, he is an old friend. He has had very good pickings out of Mowbrays and Capels in days past, and now he will take good care to pay himself for the trouble he must take, and to guarantee necessary expenses."

"It seems to me," said poor Hilda, bitterly, "that the world is full of selfishness. Every one is for himself, and looks only to secure his own interests."

"It is much the best way, my dear; you will think as I do long before you are my age. I only wish I had been a little more on my guard. I wish I had secured my own interests. One must take the world as one finds it; 'fair words butter no parsnips,' and fine sentiments never re-

plenish empty pockets. Life is a race, my dear; a hustling, jostling, pushing game, in which the strong win and the weak go to the wall, or are pushed right off the track."

"It is horrible!" said the girl, again. "It would be better to die than to live in such a world. Why did you not tell me all this before, aunt? Why did you let me grow up in a fool's paradise? Why have you let me live like a princess in a fairy-tale?"

"Where was the use of breaking the spell? You were happy in your delusion; and had things not gone so awfully wrong, you might have lived out your fairy-tale for years to come—to the end, perhaps; who knows? There are some people who never know reverses; who live and die without being disillusioned—if that is the English for *désillusioné*! If this earthquake had not happened, you would not know now what a selfish world it is—for the world has the good taste to treat the prosperous and the happy only to its smiles and flatteries; its frowns and criticisms are for the wretched and the unfortunate. I am sure I did all for the best. I thought you were ever so great an heiress! You seemed, as we read the other day—

"—rose-lined from the cold,
And meant verily to hold
Life's pure pleasures manifold."

"I should have supposed so myself, I think, if I had taken the trouble to reflect about it—which I did not. It seemed natural that I should have all I wanted, that servants should obey me, that carriages should wait my pleasure, that gold, and gems, and precious stuffs, and costly raiment of all kinds, should be at my disposal. It all came so naturally, I never thought about it. Aunt, it seems to me that I have eaten up all my cake, not knowing but that it was common daily bread, and now nothing is left but the crust. And, indeed, I hardly know where I am to find that."

"Let us come to the point. We set out by agreeing that you must live! And I asked you how you meant to do it."

"Cannot I live with you, as I have done? I could do all the sewing, and I might take pupils!"

"You cannot sew fit to be seen ; you could no more teach than you could swim ; and you cannot live with me any longer. I am going to Switzerland to friends—relations of my late husband's, and they cannot receive you ; nor shall I have a shilling beyond what I require for my own necessities."

"You will not leave me *here*—alone, friendless, and penniless ?" cried Hilda, imploringly.

"No ; I never thought of such a thing. I have provided you with a respectable home. I have been in correspondence with Mrs. Dorothy Capel, and Mr. Seeley has been down to Endlestone to see her."

"Papa's Aunt Dorothy ?"

"The same. She always disapproved of your papa, and she did not like your mamma. She and I never met but we crossed swords. She considers that you have been most improperly brought up, but she will take you as soon as I choose to send you."

"She lives at the 'Grey House,' does she not ?"

"Yes ; and a very grey place it is, I believe ; your mamma went down once, and she said she could only compare living there to being buried alive."

"I have heard of the Grey House, and of Aunt Dorothy—she is a very religious person, is she not ?"

"A perfect Methodist—a horror in every way !"

"Must I go to her ?"

"Unless you prefer the workhouse, and as you are 'able-bodied,' they would scarcely harbour you there."

"Could I not go into a convent ? I should like it much better than the 'Grey House.' "

"You are not a Roman Catholic."

"I could become one ; I am not anything. It does not matter what one is called. Perhaps I should find some comfort among the nuns !"

"Perhaps so ; though I think not. In three months' time you would be like that poor wild bird in the mews, that broke its wings, and its heart, too, against the bars of its cage. Besides, convents, like husbands, demand a dowry. The bride of heaven must not be portionless. You could, perhaps, enter as lay-sister, and scrub the floors, and wash the dishes, and clean the stoves ; but

that would scarcely be your *métier*, I should say. Do not be foolish, Hilda; if you can't have bread and honey any longer, you must be content with bread and butter—or with what as school girls we used to stigmatise as 'bread and scrape.' Even if it is the dry crust you talked about, you had better make up your mind to eat it meekly, and be thankful, if you can."

"When am I to go to Aunt Dorothy?"

"Next week, I believe; I must know you are safe with her before I start for Interlaken. Endlestone is a very healthy place, I am told, and the country round wonderfully pretty. And perhaps you will get on with Mrs. Dorothy—who knows? She is eccentric, and you are rather inclined that way yourself; and then—your life is before you. It is better for you that the crash came now than later—unless, indeed, you had married well beforehand. I am afraid if the affair with Horace Trelawny had gone on, it would have broken down when it came to the marriage settlements. The Trelawnys are not people to be content with words or promises; they must have bonds, hard coin, money, in hand. 'Safe bind, safe find,' ought to be their family motto."

"I am very thankful I am not married to any one. I have been an impostor too long as it is. For the future, come what may, I shall seem what I am—a pensioner on old Aunt Dorothy's bounty; nothing more. It will be something to be quite sure I am not living a lie."

"Well! you must make the best of it, and get all the comfort out of adversity that you can. You had better prepare at once for your packing."

"What have I to pack? My very clothes are not my own."

"Nonsense! You must take what is needful. Society does not permit us to roam the country, like Griselda, in a single garment. I will look over your things to-morrow, and tell you what you may keep, and what not. Now leave me, there's a good girl; I have so much to do, and small space of time to do it in. It is a great load off my mind that we have had this little explanation."

CHAPTER V.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

IT was all over at last—the bustle of packing and arranging for the forthcoming sale. Hilda kept only such things as were absolutely necessary, although Mrs. Mowbray soundly rated her for her folly in giving up what no one would require of her. "So ridiculous!" said the lady, with a warmth not unmixed with contempt, as her niece steadfastly refused to include in her wardrobe a rich black silk dress, with jet trimmings, which had never been worn. "Do you not see," she urged, "that it will be just the thing when you change your mourning? It is a splendid dress, and can be worn at any time. Feel the silk! how soft and thick it is, and how beautifully lustrous!"

"And therefore too grand for me; I have kept one good black silk, and that must suffice. This one must be returned to Madame with the other things, which are just as they left her establishment."

"So absurdly Quixotic! Why, at the end of twelve months you will not have a decent dress to put on. You forget that you will have to be indebted to Mrs. Dorothy for every pair of gloves and bit of ribbon as soon as your present stock is exhausted."

"I prefer waiting to see what the twelve months will bring forth. Perhaps I may find it possible to earn something—enough, at least, to pay for my clothes. Very plain dress will do for the country, I should think; and I shall not mind looking shabby. I will try to be neat; I shall not aim at more. Please let me do as I like."

"I suppose you will, whether I approve or not. And, after all, it is no affair of mine. If you choose to go empty-handed to your relative, whom you have never seen, and who is commonly reported to be extremely mean and parsimonious, you must take the consequences. I shall

not see you in your shabbiness, neither shall I witness your vexation when you have literally ‘nothing to wear,’ and dare not ask the old lady to replenish your exhausted wardrobe. Once more I tell you you are standing in your own light by making all this uncalled-for demonstration of renunciation. That new black silk will stand you in good stead for many a day, and a few ornaments will never be missed by the creditors. The time will come when you will regret not having taken my advice; but you always were wilful, Hilda, and will be so to the end, in spite of all that has happened to pull down your pride and make you humble.”

“I am humble enough, God knows,” sighed Hilda, as she closed the trunk, which contained the larger portion of her possessions. “Have I not been an impostor from my childhood? Have I not eaten food and worn clothes for which I cannot pay? Have I not lived in luxury at the expense of various tradespeople? Am I not, at this moment, preparing to carry away what is scarcely to be called my own? Oh, aunt, *cannot* you understand?”

“I cannot! And what is more, I do not pretend to understand. No one will be appreciably the better for the absurd sacrifices you are making, and you will be yourself very much the worse. We shall see what Mrs. Dorothy will say, when she finds that you have been so culpably wilful—actually saving nothing from the wreck but a scanty supply of clothes for immediate requirements!”

“I shall save my conscience; I shall feel that though I am most unfortunate, I am not really guilty. I have been thoughtless—ignorantly extravagant; but I have nothing with which actually to reproach myself. I have not brought upon myself this intolerable misery. My only comfort in the dark and dreary days to come will be the reflection that I did not willingly deceive any one, that I believed in my own heiress-ship as implicitly as I believed in my existence, and that the moment I knew my true position I accepted it, and determined not to profit by any transaction of the past. Therefore, I take with me to my new home only actual necessaries—and those which befit a person in my dependent position.”

"Very well, you must have your way. I claim no authority over you, though I do think you might, for the sake of old times, and for mere decency's sake, pay some respect to my advice. Of course, you cannot but perceive that the line you take seriously reflects on my own course of conduct. I, who am a woman of the world, and a person of common sense, feel it only due to myself and to my friends to feather my nest as warmly as the adverse circumstances will let me. It is my duty to do the best I can for myself."

"And I, too, am trying to do what I hope and believe will be the best for myself. Only, Aunt Mowbray, we have widely different views of what really is the best. Nor are our positions at all identical; you have still some money of your own—of your very own—which Uncle Mowbray left you, and it has been on my account and through me that these troubles have befallen you. Do not let us argue any more. I do not mean to cast any reflection on your conduct; I do not blame you in any way; but let me do what I feel to be the right—let me follow the only course that will yield me the contentment of a clear conscience!"

"Very well, I have no more to say. I had no idea you had so much obstinacy in you. Have a care, though, for the future, how you persist in your headstrong self-will. Your Aunt Dorothy, from what I know of her, will not be easy and complaisant as I have seen. Life at the Grey House will be a very different thing from life at Kensington Gore."

"I am prepared to find it so; but will you tell me what you do know of Aunt Dorothy Capel?"

"I know very little of her, and should not care to know more; I am happy to think she is no relation of mine. She is a self-opinionated, cantankerous, narrow-minded old maid! She makes a wonderful profession of religion, and thinks herself better than any other person. You must believe as she believes, and live as she lives, or you will have a most uncomfortable time of it. You must be prepared to submit to her in every way, to accept her *dicta* as infallible, to obey unconditionally and without demur, and, finally, to eat as much humble-pie as you can possibly manage to digest."

" You have painted a most infelicitous picture. My only consolation is that I cannot possibly be more wretched than I now am, and that at least I shall be hidden from the world, which I find so hollow, so unsatisfactory, so cruelly deceitful ! "

" Resignation seems easy enough now, no doubt ; wait till you have experienced the dead monotony of the Grey House, and the tyrannical rule of its imperious mistress for one half-year."

" Do I not remember poor papa saying that the Grey House ought to have been his ? "

" He did say so, though I do not imagine he had any real ground for such an assertion. His father left this property to his sister, rather than to his son, who, however, had nothing to complain of in the will, by which he inherited a very handsome fortune. He was to some extent compelled, or, at least, bound in honour, to act as he did, I believe ; Dorothy Capel gave up something—I have not the least idea what, for I really know next to nothing about the Capels' affairs. I used to think it rather grasping of your father, whom I supposed to be so wealthy, grumbling at the loss of a small, unimportant estate like the Grey House."

" It is not much of a place, then ? "

" Hardly worthy to be called a 'place,' I should say ; from what your mother said, and from Mr. Seeley's report, it seems to be simply a large, rambling old house, standing in a good deal of garden-ground."

" Is it in a village, or near any town ? "

" It is quite isolated, I fancy ; I don't know how far it may be from Endlestone, which is one of the smallest, and dullest, and pokiest of old market towns, and some miles distant from any railway station. Of course, there will be a church, and a Methodist chapel, and a post-office, and a principal inn, and I dare say one might fire a cannon down the High-street without much injury to human life or limb, provided it was not market-day. And that reminds me—I had almost forgotten : do not be more intimate than is absolutely necessary with the Arnisons."

" Who are they ? "

" Your first cousins ; Mrs. Arnison was a Capel."

"I never even heard of the Arnisons."

"Probably not. Rose Capel married 'to displease her family,' as people say, and no one except old Mrs. Dorothy ever forgave her. Her name was seldom mentioned, and everybody ignored her husband."

"What had he done?"

"Nothing in the way of actual wrong, if you mean that. The man is both good and respectable in his own class, I suppose; but he was not the husband for a Capel. Why he is, and always has been, *in business!* And not in a very large way, either; he ranks only as a common tradesman."

"Does he keep a shop?"

"I am not sure, but I have very little doubt that he does. He has large dye-works; he does all the dyeing for that part of the country; and I dare say, for that sort of people, the Arnisons are not badly off. You will scarcely be able to steer clear of them, I am afraid; but if you manage well, you need not be too intimate."

"But why should I steer clear of my own relations?"

"Simply because they are not persons whom it is expedient to know. Your aunt is a gentlewoman by birth, of course; but she married out of her own sphere, and so takes rank with her husband. As for your cousins, they cannot possibly be fit companions for you—mere tradesman's daughters, vulgar and pretentious, no doubt, without refinement, and without any claim to position."

"They have a position of their own, while I have none. Perhaps they will not think it expedient to know me! All things considered, I don't know why they should not give me the cold shoulder. How many children has Uncle Arnison?"

"As if I knew! and for heaven's sake, child, don't call him 'Uncle Arnison.'"

"Why not? I thought one's aunt's husband was always one's uncle. Besides, if he is an honest, upright man, why should I be ashamed of him? I see no harm in trade; I only wish my poor father had been an industrious, worthy, plodding man-of-business, rather than a—a—chevalier *d'industrie!*"

"You are incorrigible, Hilda! I expect nothing less

than that you will go and disgrace yourself by some low marriage. However, it is no affair of mine ; I have done my duty by you, and it is not my fault if you adopt these strange ideas, and level yourself with people of an inferior grade. Marry the butcher, or the baker, or the candle-stickmaker, if you like ! Only don't expect me to countenance you in your folly, or to acknowledge you as a relation."

"I don't expect anything from anybody," said Hilda, sadly. "I look for nothing, I hope for nothing ; if I can just bear on and be patient—that is all I ask."

And then Mrs. Mowbray went away to superintend her own packing, while Hilda went on with hers, carefully laying aside the silk dress which had been the bone of contention for safe return to the unpaid dressmaker. A little later Patty came to render the last services to her young mistress. She had a bulky pocket-book in her hand, from which she took some sovereigns and bank-notes, handing them to Miss Capel, and saying, as she did so, "Full seven pounds less than I hoped for, ma'am ! But those 'ladies' wardrobe' folks do know how to drive a hard bargain ! That lovely blue silk only fetched three guineas, and they offered *pounds*, but I haggled for the extra shillings—a dress that cost not a penny less than fifteen sovereigns, and not much the worse for wear ! Ah ! but buying and selling are quite different matters, as I found out long ago."

Hilda took the money, and counted out a certain sum, which she returned to her maid.

"There, Patty—there are your wages in full, and a little more. Now I want that poor sempstress's account ; I had no idea that I owed her anything."

"Oh, Miss Capel, ma'am, was that why you got me to sell nearly everything that wasn't to go back to Madame Marie's ? I wasn't thinking of my wages when I undertook the job ; though I don't deny that one's just dues are acceptable, particularly when you've got an invalid mother, mostly dependent on her children, and there are but two of us, and both in service."

"There was no other way of paying you ; you might have had something from Mr. Seeley after a while, but I

could not bear to think that you had waited on me and given all your time for the last twelvemonths, for a mere trifle. And who else is there besides the sewing woman?"

"There is Mrs. Clay, the lace-mender; she can ill afford to lose a sixpence; she is a widow with three children, and scarcely a friend in the world. And we owe her for that transfer of your ma's old lace, that she did so beautifully—to say nothing of a lot of little things that have never been settled for. And there's the young person that finished your pieces of needlework, and the French girl that mounted your flowers so nicely."

"There will be about enough to pay all. It is a dreadful thing to have defrauded the regular tradespeople; but it drove me nearly wild to think that I owed money to poor people, who worked hard for every meal, and would be really distressed at losing what was owed them. Now, I think, none of the really needy workers will be the worse on my account."

"But what will you do for yourself, Miss Capel? You are taking nothing but the plainest of mourning, and not too much of that."

"Anything will do for the country, and I shall take care of my black dresses. My only trouble on that head is, that I have nothing for the cold weather, which will soon be here—nothing except that old grey winsey, and the violet merino, which cannot pass for proper mourning."

"Anyway, Miss Capel, I'll put them up; you must have warm clothing, and one never knows how soon the weather may change. Both the grey and the violet would dye, you know, ma'am, and I don't see how you could wear anything but black for a full year to come. The merino would dye to look as good as new, for a certainty."

Hilda made no answer; she was thinking of her unknown relatives in the dyeing trade, and wondering whether they would undertake the renovation of her coloured robes. "Dyeing!" she said, presently; "I never thought of that, Patty."

"To be sure you never did, Miss Capel. How should you?—you that never put on a dyed thing in your life,

that never wore a darned stocking, nor a cleaned glove, nor a turned dress, even ! ”

“ I shall have a great deal to learn, Patty.”

“ And how you will ever do without a maid of your own, I don’t know. I suppose you couldn’t see your way clear to take me with you, Miss Capel ? I would do with small wages ; I could not do without any, because of my mother ; and I should not mind the country. It would be something of a change. Do think, ma’am, if it can’t be ; you must have some sort of maid, you know.”

“ I shall have to wait upon myself, and perhaps on some one else, for aught I know. I am going to be as poor as you are, Patty—that is, I shall have nothing of my own, and be dependent on my aunt’s generosity for food and shelter, and for clothes, when those I carry with me are worn out. Indeed, I shall be poorer and worse off, in every point of view, than yourself, because you can take another situation, and earn enough to keep you respectably, without being beholden to any one.”

“ Well, ma’am, if you do find that you want anybody, and can have a maid, will you promise to give me the preference ? Is Endlestone very far away ? ”

“ A hundred and seventy miles, or thereabouts, if I am not mistaken.”

“ Oh, dear, that is a tremendous way ! Why, France is not so far. I am afraid I shall never be able to see you, ma’am.”

“ I am afraid not, Patty ; and it is quite as well that you should not. I am going to begin a new life, and you are a part of the old happy times. I had rather not try in any way to mix the past and present. When I leave this house the day after to-morrow, I shall leave the old life behind me, and begin again as if I were another person.”

“ Oh, dear, oh, dear ! ” sighed Patty. “ Whoever would have thought of trouble—and such trouble—coming to you, Miss Capel ! But, there, this is a world of changes, and we never know in the morning what will happen before night—as the curate said to us, when poor father was run over by a drunken drayman, and brought home

dead, and he a hale, hearty man of forty-five, that didn't know what illness was."

Hilda remembered that bright and happy morning a few weeks since ; it seemed more like years than weeks—she had learned and borne so much ! She recalled that one pleasant day, during which she had considered herself engaged to Horace Trelawny ; the day which had ended in so much sorrow, the evening which had ushered in the series of misfortunes that had since overtaken her ; and she could well agree with Patty, that this *was* a world of changes. A few hours later, and she and Patty had parted, and Hilda felt that in her she lost a faithful though humble friend.

But one bright beam visited her ere she left her now desolated London home. She had supposed that of all the friends who had gathered round her in her prosperous days, not one had ever truly cared for her. There had been a few formal notes of condolence, a few polite inquiries, and then, as far as her own intimates were concerned, an unbroken blank, which led her to conclude that all were like her lover—heartless and untrue. She did not blame them, because, as she continually told herself, all her friendships and intimacies had been formed under what looked like false pretences ; but it was not the less painful for that.

" Oh ! you foolish, conceited Hilda Capel," she said to herself, as, on the last day of her London life, she destroyed a number of notes and letters, all teeming with professions of esteem and affection, and some overflowing with gushing girlish fondness. " You thought they cared for *you*—these summer weather friends, who caressed and praised you, and courted your society, as long as you had, or seemed to have, plenty of money, a splendid position, and the prospect of a brilliant future. You know now what they sought ; you have learned by this time the value of those fair speeches and bland courtesies—the true worth of that base metal, which to your inexperienced ears had all the ring of genuine gold. Ah ! the humiliation of finding out that all the time you, yourself were nothing to these flatterers—you were sought for what you had, and not for what you were. It was the reputed

heiress, not Hilda Capel, who was admired and petted, and apparently beloved."

Among all the faithless friends of other days, the one whose defection most deeply pained Hilda was Mary Sandys. Mary and she had sworn "eternal friendship," in girl-fashion, years before. They had been playfellows as children, they had been at the same school in Paris, and had shared one room; they had been inseparable in those days, and as intimate as the exactions of fashionable society would permit, ever since they had together made their *début* some months before. Next to Horace's faithlessness, and her aunt's heartless behaviour, Mary Sandys' inconstancy had weighed upon her heart. "I would never have deserted *her*," she used to tell herself; "if she had lost all, as I have, I would only have clung the closer to her; she would have had at least one true and faithful friend even though the whole world forsook her. And she—*she is like the rest!*"

And even as she sat over the fire, burning letter after letter, smiling disdainfully over some, and tossing others, unread, into the flames, there came to her the first glimpse of sunshine after so long a season of unbroken gloom—some one tapped at her door, and Mary Sandys entered.

"My poor darling! my sweet Hilda!" was her cry, as she threw her arms round her friend's neck, and wept as bitterly as if she herself bewailed the loss of all things. And Hilda was melted to gentle tears, such as she had not shed since the day when Horace left her. Mary's tender words and tones, and her warm caresses, were unmistakable, and they were as balm to her poor wounded heart.

"Oh, Mary, why did you not come before?" asked Hilda, when both had somewhat regained their composure; "why did you not write?"

"I was away in Normandy with grandmamma, who has been very ill; I did write once, and I trusted my letter to one of the servants of the hotel where we were staying, and perhaps it was never posted. But, Hilda, it was only yesterday I learned from the Arlingtons what had happened. I did not return home till the beginning of the week. I supposed that all was well with you, and that you were as happy, if not happier, than usual. I was

rather surprised you did not answer my letter, because I wrote it in great trouble, when dear grandmamma was declared to be dying ; but I accounted for it on the supposition of your engagement to Mr. Trelawny. Everybody was talking about it when I left England."

And then Hilda told Mary, as well as she could, all that had occurred since their last interview at the grand garden-party of the season, just before the breaking of the storm ; and Mary wept with her, and sympathised, and ended by inviting Hilda to share her home till fortune smiled again.

"It will never smile again, dear," said Hilda, "and I cannot accept your kindness ; though it has done me all the good in the world. An hour ago I thought I had no friend on earth ; now, I feel not utterly alone. But, Mary, I would rather not stay with you at present—I could not bear to meet our old acquaintances, and as a new life lies before me, the sooner I commence it the better ; two or three months of your society would only make the change harder when it came. Besides, all is arranged with Mrs. Dorothy Capel, and I believe as things are, I ought to go to her."

And, considering all the circumstances, Mary could not but feel that Hilda was right. She could not offer her friend a permanent home, even if she would accept it. It was best that she should be with her own relations ; and when time had worn away some of the prejudices of unkind people, and had proved to the world that she herself was guiltless of her father's frauds, she could return more happily to the circle in which she had once moved so brilliantly. But they could write to each other frequently, and Hilda might always be sure that she had one true and faithful friend, who would never fail her in the hour of need. As regarded Horace Trelawny, Mary said little, because she saw that Hilda quivered all over, as if with pain, at the mere mention of his name—though in her inmost heart she despised him, and resolved to give him the cut direct the next time they met in society. Mary had never thought Mr. Trelawny worthy of Hilda Capel.

CHAPTER VI.

A LONG JOURNEY.

“ An English home—grey twilight poured
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,
Softer than sleep—all things in order stored,
A haunt of ancient Peace.”

ON a bright September morning, Hilda set forth on her long and dreary journey northwards. When the moment of parting came, Mrs. Mowbray showed some signs of emotion, and she even attempted something like excuses for the unkindness of which she had been guilty towards the innocent victim of her father’s fraud and folly. “ You see, Hilda,” she said, “ it really was necessary that you and I should go our several ways; our remaining together any longer was without an object. It was better for you as well as for myself that we should separate.”

“ Much better,” said Hilda quietly, but turning, if possible, paler as she spoke. It happened that they were standing in precisely the same spot, and in the same attitude, as when, just a week before the arrival of the awful tidings from Paris, her aunt had said to her, “ You and I can never part; can we, dearest child? We are mother and daughter, in all but name. Even your marriage, which already I anticipate, must not interfere between us; I cannot lose the only daughter I ever had.” And Hilda had gaily replied that they would always be one family; home would not be home if dear auntie, who had so spoiled and petted her, were not included in it! But now she could only admit that it was “ *much better* ” to part, and that immediately, and entirely; for Mrs. Mowbray pointedly refrained from alluding to any probable reunion in the future. No more petting and spoiling for poor Hilda, who must make her own way in the world; all the caresses and fondling, all the indulgences, had been for Major Capel’s heiress. The times were changed, and

the worldly, selfish, easy-going Mrs. Mowbray had changed with them. It behoved Hilda to change also, as the bright delusions and the pleasant myths of her girlhood melted into nothingness, leaving only the stern and bitter realities of a present from which there was no escape. Her aunt responded, "So very much better! I am glad you see as I do; I was afraid you might not, perhaps, quite understand my line of conduct."

"I perfectly understand it, I believe," was again the calm reply; and Mrs. Mowbray, who had so much dreaded a scene that she had actually contemplated the avoidance of a personal farewell, congratulated herself on Hilda's extreme good sense and reasonable behaviour.

"So then," she continued, "I need say no more; it is a great comfort to me to find that we so well understand each other; and, of course, we shall correspond—occasionally, that is; a frequent interchange of letters would not be prudent for either of us, would it? You are a dear, sensible girl, and I must say you have borne your reverses with wonderful philosophy; you deserved a happier fate. And you never need despair, my love; with your face and natural cleverness, all kinds of good fortune are possible. I shall expect you to make a brilliant marriage, yet! I shall always be proud of you, and deplore the unhappy circumstances that have led to our separation; you must at once study your Aunt Dorothy's character, and find out how she is to be managed, and pray be careful as to your associations with the Arnisons. Oh! how I envy you your youth—the world is all before you!"

Another minute, and Hilda, in charge of Mrs. Parrott, was being rattled over the stones to the railway station. Mrs. Mowbray had declared that it would be quite too much for her poor shattered nerves to see the last of her dear niece, and Hilda thankfully assented. How bright the park looked! how many-tinted were the trees! for the foliage of London wears its autumn livery betimes. How the sunbeams sparkled on the Serpentine! And Hilda thought sadly of the words of the American poet—

"How strikingly the course of Nature tells,
By its light heed of human suffering,
That it was fashioned for a happier world."

Hilda's pocket, as you may imagine, was very scantily supplied, so when Parrott asked her if she should take her ticket—a thing, by the bye, which the girl had never in her life done for herself—she assented, as a matter of course, but remarked, as she tendered her purse, "Second class, Parrott; I cannot afford first now."

"Oh dear! but you cannot go all that way second class, Miss Capel," was the woman's reply. "You will be just tired to death; besides, *ladies* always travel first class!"

"Very well; then I must cease to be a lady. Still, if I went third class even, I think I should not feel the less a gentlewoman when I stepped on to the platform at my journey's end."

"As you please, ma'am. Only, I am sure Mrs. Mowbray will be distressed to hear that you travelled by any class but *first*!"

"You need not tell her; I dare say she will not ask. But make haste, please; the train starts in about five minutes."

When Parrott returned she found Miss Capel duly established in a comfortable second-class compartment, and her luggage safely in the van. There was not much time for further conversation, and the train was soon upon its way, and Mrs. Parrott for ever lost to sight. It was a relief to Hilda when the train was really in motion, and gliding swiftly past suburban roads and villas; the new life had now commenced in earnest. And while she reviewed the past, and dwelt with lingering fondness on its happy memories, she was speeding on her way through "fresh woods and pastures new," and London was left some miles behind ere she realised her present surroundings.

As the day advanced, the sunshine grew paler; grey mists bounded the horizon, a cold wind swept across the dead level of the country through which they passed, and Hilda grew tired of her hard seat, and of the shaking and rattling inseparable from travelling second class. She grew still more weary as the afternoon wore on—so weary that she cared little to note the unfamiliar landscape on either side. For many miles it was monotonous, and bleak in the extreme, and it was not till the evening shades were gathering around that she awoke to the fact that she had

entered on a region equally wild and beautiful. Her fellow-passengers had dropped off one by one, and now she was alone in her compartment; she began to wonder whether she was approaching her journey's end. The last station at which they had stopped was called Ellingham, and, consulting her "Bradshaw," she discovered that the next was Crabb's End, where she must alight, and take a conveyance to Endlestone, which was seven miles distant from the rail. She had not much more time than was necessary to gather together the belongings that were with her in the carriage, and to make a sort of impromptu toilet under difficulties, before the train again began to slacken pace—it had been a slow train for the last forty miles—and there she was, opposite a long white board, on which was inscribed, in tall black letters, "Crabb's End—for Thursby and Endlestone." She appeared to be the only alighting passenger; her trunks were already taken from the van, and before she could look well around and feel sure that all her properties were safe and sound about her, the steam-whistle had sounded, and the engine was once more snorting and puffing on its iron way. Another minute, and it had glided round a curve and was altogether out of sight. Hilda suddenly felt as if she were shipwrecked on the desolate shores of an unknown country.

And an unknown country it was. She took a rapid survey, and it seemed to her as if Crabb's End must be the end not only of Crabb—whoever he might be—but of civilised humanity. There was no habitation in view, saving only the solitary little station, with rocks and crags on the one hand, and a sweep of undulating heath or moor on the other, dimly seen in the fast fading evening light. The leaves of a cluster of trees close to the platform rustled sadly in the chilly breeze; the telegraph wires vibrated mournfully, like the strings of an *Aolian harp*; there was a low murmur as of falling waters; far away a sheep-bell tinkled in the distance. All was dim, shadowy, and silent as an Alpine glen; and Hilda, standing there alone, with all her worldly goods at her feet and in her hands, felt forsaken and forlorn, a helpless waif and stray, tossed up from the waves of a wild, receding, tempest-tossed and tempest-driven sea. Her last distinct

impressions were of the familiar crowded London streets, with their ceaseless roar and bustle. Around her were the hush and majesty of the everlasting hills; only the wheel-worn rails, a ghostly signal-light, and the sad, musical wires overhead testified that she had not wandered past the bounds of civilised humanity.

But what was she to do next? Where must she go? How was she to reach her destination? No one had even asked her for her ticket. The next minute, however, she saw the station-master approaching, and heard the invariable demand. The man looked curiously at her, she thought, as he examined the little bit of pasteboard, and then civilly asked her if her luggage was all right.

"Quite right," she replied, glad of the chance of obtaining information. "And can you tell me how to get on to Endlestone?"

"I am afraid I can't, ma'am. They do keep an old shandry or two at 'The Sportsman' yonder; but that's full a mile away. If gentlefolks alight here, they're mostly *met*, you see; and—yes! I thought I heard wheels; there's some sort of carriage on the road now. Maybe it's for you, ma'am."

"I hope it is. Mrs. Capel knew by what train to expect me."

"Then it's all right, for this is Mrs. Capel's carriage; I should know it a mile off."

And so would Hilda next time she saw it. As the station-master ceased speaking, an ancient, lumbering vehicle, of curious construction, drawn by two elderly, plodding horses, and driven by a coachman who seemed to have stepped out of some picture of the last century, drew up at the gate, and the station-master cried, "Is that you, Jacob?"

"I should say as 'twas," replied a gruff voice. "Train's in, I know, for I saw the steam of her coming out of Dunsey Cutting a quarter of an hour ago. Horse got a stone in his shoe at Chinsey Ford. Ain't often behind time."

"Never knew you late afore, Jacob. Here's a young lady for the Grey House."

"Let's have her!" said Jacob, very much as though

he were waiting for a bale of goods; and before Hilda could speak a word she was being hoisted up into the ramshackle old carriage, that looked as if it ought to have been broken up years before. Jacob grunted something which was probably intended to be courteous, for he busied himself in arranging her packages, and directed her to wrap herself in a moth-eaten rug which he produced from under the seat. Then they set off at a steady, jog-trot pace; Jacob's animals were evidently no more to be hurried than the stately quadrupeds in the Ladies' Mile, and Jacob himself was undoubtedly a person of importance, who would consider it quite beneath his dignity to make haste under any circumstances short of life or death. So they plodded on along a tolerably good and level road, which seemed to lead to some kind of village; but just as several buildings came in view, the horses, who evidently knew the way as well as Jacob, turned off into a cross road, which in a few minutes brought the travellers on to a wide and open moor.

"Shall we reach Endlestone before dark?" asked Hilda, rather nervously, for she could see the white road winding away for miles in front of her, and there were evidently some steep ascents to be surmounted.

"It won't be dark, missy—leastways, not for long," was Jacob's answer; "in less than an hour the moon will rise over yon mountain, and it's going to be clear, though we've had rather a murky day for this time of the year. And Jupiter and Juno knows their way every inch of it; they'd go right to Endlestone if I fell asleep on the box this very minute. They never makes mistakes, and they never shies at nothing, nor bolts, nor stumbles—they've too much sense."

For the next two miles neither Jacob nor Hilda spoke. It began to grow dark, or, at least, very dusk, and the incomparable horses trotted on, stopping to take breath after a climb, and going carefully downhill without much apparent guidance from their driver's hand. And, just as the grey shadows were turning black, and the road gleamed like a pale line among the invisible heather and bracken, a sudden radiance flushed the crags to which Jacob had pointed, and ere long the sky in that direction

was all aglow, and the darkness had melted into the mellow beams of the full harvest-moon.

As the light grew, Hilda looked around her ; they were passing over a level tract of land that was evidently swampy, and the road became a species of broad causeway, with water-courses on each side, and glimmering reed-fringed pools in the distance ; then a cool wind blew in her face, and before them was what looked like a huge black battlemented wall, rising with here and there a silvered peak into the deep blue cloudless sky ; she could both see and feel that they were ascending a steep acclivity. Presently Jacob dismounted, and led the horses, not, as he explained, because they were untrustworthy, but because they should not be daunted by the difficulties of the way ; and as the carriage dragged more and more, and the horses seemed to be scaling something like a perpendicular ascent, Hilda volunteered to get out also. To this proposal, however, Jacob would not consent. "No, no, missy," he replied, "keep where you be ; your light weight ain't of no account, the beasts would not miss the burden, and you would tire yerself for naught. We'll be over the brow directly, and on the other side of the fell, and then we'll soon be on the level moor, and Endlestone right before us. Come on, Jupiter ! You're leaving too much collar-work to Juno, my lad, and that ain't fair ; he's older than you."

"I thought Juno was a female," said Hilda, feeling amused in spite of her weariness.

"Well, and so he were—that is, *she* were ; and we had a real Juno once—a *mare*, that had been worth no end of money in her time ; but she died—got kicked somehow out at grass ; and when I couldn't find a match to Jupiter of the proper sect, I looked out for a horse that would do to go in harness with him, and I found this 'un, and called him Juno, because I thought Jupiter might take better to him, and I were used to the name myself. Of course, I know that Juno were of the female persuasion, though I'm given to understand she were all a fable, as well as Jupiter and Neptune, that's said to rule the sea, and him as made thunderbolts, and the fellow that was stronger than Sampson, and cleaned out a lot of stables

that hadn't been tidied up since the Deluge, and all that there pagan lot."

Jacob was evidently becoming garrulous, inspired by his references to the Olympian hierarchy, and he began to discourse on the geography of the district around them. "Do you see that queer-shaped hill yonder, missy, like an urn with a piece scooped out of one side?—that's Englefield, the prettiest mountain in the world, though not the highest, as I've heard tell; and there's one part of it where you can put one foot in one county, and the other in another, and pitch a stone into a third! And Endlestone itself is between two counties, as one may say—the town is in Broadshire, but the Grey House is in Fellshire. In five minutes, missy, I shall be able to show you where Endlestone is—we shall see the lights of it. It's a fine town, is Endlestone, and has been much improved since I were a boy; we've a post every day now, instead of twice a-week, and gas-works, which I don't hold with; they make a stink, and are bad for the tallow-chandlers and snuffers-makers; and they do talk of a new branch of railroad—what's called a *loop-line*—that will give us a station of our own, and will be handy in many ways, though a nuisance in other respects; for railways do bring bad characters, and ain't conducive to morality, as I am well informed."

"Endlestone is a very small place, is it not?" asked Hilda.

"Deary me, no, missy! There are bigger towns, no doubt, and I suppose one mustn't mention it in the same day as London, where the Queen holds her Court, and where there's so many people you don't know your next-door neighbour. But it's a large town for these parts! Why, there's the High Street, and Church Street, and Chapel Street, and Mill Lane, and Moor Side, and River Side, to say nothing of bits that have no names; and at the last census the population amounted to between seventeen and eighteen *hundred* people! Think of that! Now, how many people might there be in London, missy?"

"About three millions, I believe—rather more!"

"Three *millions*! That sounds tremendous! But I

don't know rightly how much a million is ; it's a good many thousands, I suppose ? ”

“ Ten hundred thousands.”

“ That's more than I can understand ; only I see it must take a heap of Endlestones to make only one-third part of London. There's our lights, missy ; look a little way to the right of Juno's head. The moon's that bright I can almost see the church tower. The rest of the way is easy for the horses, so I'll take my seat again.”

And then there was silence, and the night grew more chill, and Hilda was glad to wrap herself in the rug. Presently she fell into a doze, and when she awoke, she was at the bottom of a steep, irregularly-built street, and close at hand was what looked like a fine old church, in the tower of which a clock was striking nine. And then, thoroughly aroused, Hilda began to look about her, for she knew that this must be Endlestone, and that her long, weary journey drew near its close. The church, with its ancient cloisters, lay quite at the lowest end of the High Street ; its graveyard was washed by the river that was spanned by a goodly three-arched bridge, over which they had driven while Hilda was still sleeping. All the shops were shut, but lights shone in many of the upper windows. A little way up the street it widened into the Market Place, in the middle of which stood the Moat, or Mote Hall, a dilapidated building of no great size. Opposite was the Post Office, and, a little further on, the Bank. Then the hilly street narrowed again ; there were fewer shops and more private houses, and very soon they were out of the town altogether, and progressing at a rapid rate along a good level high-road—evidently the road to the Grey House, for Jupiter and Juno had quickened their speed, looking forwards to a supper of oats and their own warm stable.

Presently the carriage turned into another road, or rather lane, and again into another, overshadowed by large trees, through which the moon's rays scarcely penetrated. Then a gate, already open, was passed, and Hilda saw that she was in an orchard, well-stocked with fruit ; and Jacob turned round, and observed, “ Here we are, missy ; we're at home at last ! —that's the Grey House ! ”

At first, Hilda saw only the apple and plum trees; but as they came clear of these, there was the house, standing back behind a wide lawn and sunny flower-beds. Grey enough it looked, in the pale, cold moonlight, except where ivy or Virginian creepers had mantled its high-pointed gables and hoary walls. The moon shone full upon the front, showing many small-paned windows, and a deep porch leading into a low-ceiled, spacious hall, in which a lamp was burning, casting a pleasant reflection upon the gravel path and the dewy grass beyond. Some one was standing at the open door—some one clad in a dark, Quaker-like costume, with stiff grey curls pinned up under a stiff white cap; surely this must be Aunt Dorothy!

Tired as she was, and sick with exhaustion—for she had eaten nothing since a hurried breakfast—Hilda's heart beat strongly with excitement, not unmixed with apprehension, as she gazed on the tall, stately figure in the doorway; on the stranger-kinswoman, who, for the present, at least, must be the arbitress of her sad fortunes.

"Welcome! Niece Hilda," said Mrs. Dorothy, in cold and measured tones, as the almost frozen and utterly weary girl was half-lifted from the carriage in the strong arms of Jacob, who seemed now quite an old friend. And Hilda's passive hand was taken, and a formal though not unkindly kiss imprinted on her forehead; while the mistress of the Grey House went on to say, "Thou art miserably cold, Hilda, and, I doubt not, much fatigued; come into the dining-room, and take off thy wraps; tea has been awaiting thee this half-hour; it is a toilsome drive across our moors, after a long railway journey."

Hilda would much have preferred to go straight to her chamber and to bed, without making any regular meal, but she felt constrained to obey the commanding voice and the rather imperative gesture which pointed to the warm and lighted room at the far side of the hall. She followed her aunt submissively, though her limbs were so cramped she could only move with difficulty; and truly she was glad to see and to feel the noble fire that glowed in a vast, old-fashioned grate, such as Hilda had never seen before.

"Sit thee down," said Mrs. Dorothy, pointing to a chair drawn up on the hearth. "Barker," turning to a prim serving-woman, who looked as tall and stately, and almost as old, as her mistress, "just move the chair further back—about three-quarters of a yard further back. Miss Hilda is too thoroughly chilled to bear, all at once, the heat of that large fire. Sudden warmth sometimes induces faintness. I hope thou art not one of the fainting sort, child. Thou lookest but a poor, peaky thing; thou hast outgrown thy strength perchance."

"I never fainted in my life," said Hilda, a little hurriedly. "I am tired, and cold, and, I think, hungry. I am never ill, though I have had the headache lately."

"I am glad to hear it. Drink this tea; it is strong, and not too hot, and it will revive thee. Tell Nancy to bring in the chicken, Barker, and see that my niece's room is quite ready for her; she will be glad to retire as soon as she has broken her fast."

After all, considering her long abstinence, Hilda made but a scanty meal, or, perhaps, she was "too far gone," as people say, to relish the homely, but appetising food set before her, and she was rejoiced to hear her aunt say, "Then, if thou wilt take no more, Hilda, Barker shall show thee to thy chamber, and unpack what thou needest for to-night. I will not keep thee up for worship, for I see that thou art really over-tired. As to breakfast, thou shalt have it in thy room to-morrow morning; I do not hold with such indulgences, and, as a rule, I require that all my household assemble themselves in this room for worship at exactly a quarter to eight o'clock. But for once, I give thee leave to take thy fill of sleep, since thou appearest to need it. When thou wishest for breakfast, ring thy bell. Now, good-night; I wish thou mayest sleep well."

The formal kiss was not repeated; only a slight touch of hands passed between the stately old lady and her grand-niece, and the latter thankfully followed her guide upstairs, and along a low, crooked, and vaulted passage to the chamber allotted her.

She was rather surprised to find no fire and no toilet candles, but she was too tired to wonder or speculate

about anything. Only, as she laid her head upon the pillow, she remembered that Mrs. Dorothy had twice spoken of "worship." What could she mean? "Ah!" she said to herself, "Aunt Mowbray said she was a Methodist, but she looks to me more like a Quakeress." Hilda was lulled to sleep by the sound of distant psalmody.

CHAPTER VII.

HILDA'S NEW HOME.

" Palms of glory, raiment bright,
Crowns that never fade away,
Gird and deck the saints in light,
Priests, and kings, and conquerors they."

AND when Hilda awoke the next morning the music was still in her ears. She listened. Some one was playing a solemn hymn-tune on a small but sweet-toned organ—she had noticed one in a recess of the dining-room the evening before—and several voices, male and female, were singing to it. Had the "worship" gone on all night, then? By degrees Hilda comprehended that this was the morning "worship," to which Mrs. Dorothy had alluded. She had slept unbrokenly through the hours of darkness, and now the sunshine was streaming into the room, birds were twittering, fowls were clucking in the poultry-yard near at hand; a cow, not very far off, had something on her mind, and lowed continuously. There was also a rustle of leaves without, and presently there was a gabble of geese; a wasp was buzzing against the window-pane—all country sounds reminding Hilda that London lay many miles away, and that an immeasurable distance separated the old life that had ended yesterday from the strange, new, unfamiliar career that began to-day.

The music ceased, and Hilda, now thoroughly awakened, looked about her. She was lying in a capacious, old-fashioned four-poster, that somehow reminded her of an

ancient family coach ; the hangings were of faded chintz, the counterpane was a wonderful device of many-coloured octahedrons, with a choice centre-piece, displaying the washed-out features of the Princess Charlotte, surrounded by the dates—almost illegible—of her Royal Highness's birth and marriage. But the sheets which Hilda pressed were of the finest linen, white as snow, and smelling of dried rose-leaves and lavender ; half-a-dozen damask towels awaited her pleasure on the folding towel-horse ; the toilet-cover was deeply ornamented with long, knotted fringe, clearly of home manufacture ; and a huge pin-cushion, frilled and flounced like a fine lady's petticoat, filled the centre of the table, on which were no modern powder-pots, nor crystal scent-bottles, but only a book on each side of the filagree-framed looking-glass, one of which Hilda shrewdly conjectured must be a Bible. What the other might be she could not even guess, but "something pious," she was very well assured. The room was low-ceiled, and crossed by two uneven beams ; the three windows were draped with curtains that matched the dull chintz of the bed-hangings ; a venerable walnut-wood wardrobe occupied the wall opposite two of the windows, and the chimney-piece, about three inches wide, over which was the portrait of a lady pastorally attired, simpering at a flute-playing swain upon an impossible bank of flowers, was exactly opposite the bed. All the rest of the furniture corresponded, even to the embroidered, olive-green, velvet bell-pull, with an elaborate brass handle, and a huge, nearly colourless, rosette of what had once been quilted green satin, concealing its junction with the bell-wire. Hilda wondered whether she had awakened in the celebrated era of the Regency ; all her surroundings appeared to be so many years older than herself.

Presently she could hear a little bustle downstairs—probably the servants dispersing at the conclusion of the "worship." Then a bell was rung, but not loudly—the breakfast bell, no doubt, sounded according to daily usage—and Hilda began to think she would enjoy a cup of tea herself. Her night's sleep had refreshed her, and she would have liked to get up at once, and dress quickly,

and go down to breakfast, but she did not venture to disobey the commands she had received ; therefore, after a few moments' hesitation, she pulled the green velvet bell-rope, and waited to see who would answer to her summons.

In a short time the person called Barker appeared, with a tray in her hand—a common japanned tray, very different from the dainty *Rose du Barri* china affairs to which Hilda had been accustomed. But the ugly iron tray was covered with the finest of spotless napkins, and the small, melon-shaped teapot was of solid silver. Mrs. Dorothy despised electro, and patronised simple earthenware in the absence of the genuine metal ; the tiny cream-jug was also of silver, and, like the teapot, an antique. As for the china, it was old and ugly enough for a connoisseur.

Barker placed the tray on the table, and grimly demanded how Miss Capel had slept. Miss Capel could only reply that she had slept quite soundly, and was much refreshed, and she hoped Mrs. Dorothy was well. "Quite well," responded the waiting-woman ; "my mistress is always well, thank God !" Barker spoke in a tone indicative of her disapproval of people who were so inconsiderate as to be occasionally unwell. Ill-health, in her opinion, unless caused by accident, proceeded entirely from luxurious and self-indulgent habits. She had a profound contempt for any one who breakfasted in bed, or in a bedroom, and she heartily believed in cold water, and plenty of it. Nothing but tea and bread and butter was on the tray ; but oh, such butter, such bread, such thick, rich, unadulterated cream ! Hilda innocently wondered how much per quart her aunt gave for that "wonderful double cream," about which Mrs. Mowbray's cook used to make so much fuss, and the price of which had always been considered rather exorbitant, even in that easy-going, extravagant household at Kensington Gore.

Her breakfast was soon over, and then she dressed expeditiously, not waiting for the usual can of hot water, and not caring to ring for it, lest her request should be denied or treated as extraordinary. When she drew up the blinds she was astonished to find how wide a prospect her windows commanded. Two of them

looked across to distant hills—mountains, indeed!—beyond long, wavy ridges of purple moors; one “gave” upon a large garden, where flowers and vegetables flourished amicably together, and the view on that side was bounded by a high grey wall, overtopped, however, by well-laden fruit trees, behind which was a sort of plantation of tall, dark firs. The hills, if there were any in that direction, were of no great elevation. Hilda opened one of the windows, and a cool, crisp air came in—an air which, though slightly frosty, as it seemed to her, breathed health and vigour, and a certain delightful fragrance; the mists were being gathered away, and scattered higher and higher among the hills; the sky overhead was clear as crystal, and the whole landscape was bathed in softest golden sunshine.

Presently, as she gazed, some one came along the flagged terrace under her front window, and, looking down, she beheld a figure which she was sure was that of Mrs. Dorothy. But in what a strange costume for an elderly maiden lady! The night before she had worn a rich, though plainly made, black silk dress, with something of a train, a cap of exquisite neatness and delicacy, and a daintily-quilled ruffle, fastened with a diamond pin. This morning her gown was short and rather scanty, drawn up over a linsey petticoat of some dark, coarse material, with a faded and discoloured hem; on her shoulders was a folded plaid, very much the worse for outdoor wear, and on her head a thick *muslin* cap, with a good deal of deep frill, under a flapping, limp, white sun-bonnet. To complete the toilet were strong leather mould-stained gloves and undeniably top-boots, with soles that were evidently intended for pedestrianism in dank herbage and ploughed fields. While Hilda was debating within herself whether this could actually be the stately Mrs. Dorothy of the night before, the front of the sun-bonnet was dexterously turned back, the face it shaded looked up, and she perceived that she was not mistaken.

“Good morning, Niece Hilda,” said the lady; “I hope thou art rested. I am going to the pigs—wilt thou come down now and accompany me?”

“Did she say the *pigs*?” questioned Hilda. “I don’t

want to see pigs—nasty grunting creatures! but I suppose I had better go."

She assented, and Mrs. Dorothy called out, "Loop up your dress, and put on your hat and a warm shawl; you puling Londoners are always catching cold!" It was one of Mrs. Dorothy's peculiarities that she dropped her Quakerish *thee* and *thou* under certain circumstances, and then she spoke quickly and almost sharply, and like a woman of business, as indeed she was.

Hilda found her aunt at the foot of the stairs, and she could not refrain from casting a glance at the masculine-looking top-boots and the thick stick, with a spud at the end of it, which she carried in her hand. A very curious specimen of womanity seemed this new-found aunt to the fashionably-educated London and Paris bred Hilda; but she expressed no surprise as she followed the lady through a back hall into a kitchen yard, and across a paddock, to the "*sties*," where resided the favoured animals, whose acquaintance Miss Capel was about to make. As they approached, there was a great noise of grunting and snorting, and a gate being opened, eight or ten fine young porkers ran, or rather rushed, to greet their mistress, who stroked and patted them, and tickled their fat necks, to their evident contentment. "All one litter!" said Mrs. Dorothy, proudly, as she contemplated the unruly creatures. "There were three more, but they did not feed well, so I turned them into another pen to 'run on' before I have them fatted for bacon. They are a good kind. The mother has taken two prizes at the Donnithorne Cattle Show. Come and see the sow."

Hilda followed her aunt in amazed silence across the yard into a veritable pigsty—a month ago she would as soon have thought of going into a coal-cellars. And did Mrs. Dorothy and her household live on pork, bacon, hams, and sausages? With a slight variation or two, Tennyson's lines might have been applied to them as they stood there in the morning sunshine—

"*Pigs to right of them,*
Pigs to left of them,
Pigs in front of them,
Gobbled and grunted."

What could one woman do with so many pigs ! The mamma-sow, to which Hilda's attention was principally drawn, lay lazily on her side beside a half-emptied trough. She had evidently eaten her fill of good buttermilk and meal, and was in a state of perfect swinish felicity. She did not rise to salute her mistress, but she blinked her little eyes, elevated her snout, and grunted something which Mrs. Dorothy seemed quite to understand. "This is 'Jessie White,'" said she to Hilda; "most of my pigs have names. Get up, Jessie, you lazy thing !" And Jessie struggled up, and on to her legs, arched her enormous back, gave an appreciative snort, and betook herself, after a moment's reflection, to that tempting trough. "Greedy Jessie !" exclaimed Mrs. Dorothy, in the fond tone of a mother making believe to censure her pet child.

Another and another pig was introduced. In one sty was an immense litter of little snow-white squeakers, not quite a week old, with their unwieldy mamma—"Aunt Sally." In another compartment were three young pigs, black all over, evidently in process of education. Close by, in separate sties, any number of creatures, all grunting loudly at the visitors, and not far off, two of the fattest and ugliest pigs imaginable, in most vociferous mood. Again Hilda wondered whether she was doomed to a strictly pork diet, with perhaps a chicken now and then by way of special treat. Having been introduced to Jeremiah, and Obadiah, and Madame Malibran, to Sweet William, and Duchess May and Jenny Lind, and a host besides—not to mention sundry unchristened litters—she ventured to inquire, "But what can you do with so many, ma'am ? "

"Do with them, child ?" sharply replied the lady. "Why ! what do you suppose I do with them ?"

"I cannot guess," humbly answered Hilda; "you can never eat them all."

"Eat them ! I and my household would die of scurvy if we attempted such a feat—for we should never eat anything else ; there is meat here for years to come. Eat them—all of them ! Only a Londoner would have such a notion. No, child, I keep them for profit ; not but what

I get my pleasure out of them, too. Some ladies fancy Persian cats, some pet lap-dogs, even bull-dogs; some like squalling macaws and prating parrots—I prefer *pigs*. I buy them and sell them; I breed and feed them, as we say at the cattle shows; in short, I am a pig-dealer and a pork-butcheress."

Hilda could not reply for pure astonishment. Mrs. Dorothy clearly was not joking. A "pig-dealer!" a "pork-butcheress!" Oh, what would Aunt Mowbray say! This was worse than anything she had anticipated. Mrs. Dorothy silently beheld her discomfiture, and was only amused. "You don't seem to like pigs, Niece Hilda?" she said gravely. "Well, tastes differ; perhaps you like cows? I have nine first-rate cows, and several fine calves, and as I have more fodder than usual this year, I have a great mind to buy a few promising young bullocks, and send them south when they are fattened. I deal in all kinds of cattle. This is quite a grazing farm, though I have a little arable land two miles off."

So, then, the Grey House was a farm! And yet it did not look like it; and certainly the farmeress, in spite of her spud, her sun-bonnet, and her top-boots, wore a decidedly patrician air. Hilda could not truthfully say that she did like pigs, neither did she appreciate cows, except as agreeable objects in a distant landscape. The grunting herd she naturally shunned, but she had a great dread of horned creatures, and never went near them if she could possibly help it. Also she disliked geese and turkeys—the latter she had caught sight of *en route* for the pig-sties; the cackling of the former she distinctly heard at intervals, mingled with loud crows and clucks and quacks, that testified to a well-stocked poultry yard.

Having thoroughly interviewed the pigs, Mrs. Dorothy proposed that they should visit the cow-houses; and thither, in fear and trembling, Hilda repaired, meeting a whole squadron of hissing geese upon the way, and once menaced by an angry turkey-cock, which, however, speedily retreated when attacked in turn by his valiant mistress, spud in hand. It was quite a relief to come upon a few homely hens, and later still to encounter a magnificent peacock, spreading his glories in the sunshine,

and strutting to and fro, as if to display his superiority to the meek peahens who followed in his train. But Hilda's progress was attended with unpleasant consequences. It was a new experience to her, walking through farm-yard litters, and on the turf, still wet with heavy dews. She soon began to appreciate the virtues of short petticoats and clump soles, and quickly arrived at the conclusion that Mrs. Dorothy's original costume, though far from becoming, was well suited to present emergencies. For Hilda stepped more than once into something that went *squish* under and about her neat Balmorals, and though she carefully held up her skirts, as she imagined, they were splashed and streaked, and almost bedraggled before she came back to the house. The only part of the expedition which she at all enjoyed was the walk through the kitchen garden and ornamental grounds. Mrs. Dorothy was an experienced florist, and a love of rare and beautiful flowers was a weakness to which she candidly confessed, as leading her, as she sometimes feared, into actual extravagance. There were also a viney and a small greenhouse, both in first-rate order, and a fernery of no mean pretensions. Mrs. Dorothy was proud of her roses as of her pigs; and in a sheltered spot, well protected, she gloried in her luxuriant *Todeas*—the only specimens, she averred, to be found anywhere in the neighbourhood for many miles around! Then there was the herb-garden, fragrant with thyme and mint and marjoram, and whole banks of lavender, still covered with its odorous grey spikes, though large bundles had been already gathered, and were even now drying in the herb-room for future use in the linen chests and presses. Rows of crisp-leaved double parsley looked almost as pretty as borders of *lycopodium*; hoary camomile flourished in abundance, together with venerable but blooming shrubs of the wormwood or southernwood, commonly called "Old Man," yellow-flowered tansy, tarragon, and many medicinal herbs and plants, which Mrs. Dorothy supplied to all her poorer neighbours, or to any one who had sufficient faith in the "garden physic," which she frequently prescribed.

"Are you fond of gardening?" asked Mrs. Dorothy, presently.

"I don't know," replied Hilda. "I like to see nice flowers and shrubs."

"I suppose your chief experience of gardens is confined to Regent's Park and Kensington Horticultural Gardens, to which, perhaps, may be added Covent Garden?"

"Something more than that. I know many beautiful private gardens, and I have been several times to Kew."

"Ah! there I envy you. I never visited Kew. It is more than forty years since I was in London, and I am told it is wonderfully altered and extended. Well! I think I shall give over certain gardening duties into your hands. I want more help with the flowers."

"But I know literally nothing about them."

"Never too late to learn. By the way, how old are you, niece Hilda? Mr. Seeley did inform me, but I have forgotten. My memory, I am sorry to say, is becoming—for recent events, that is—terribly sieve-like."

"I was eighteen last birthday, ma'am."

"You may as well call me 'aunt'; 'grand-aunt' would, of course, be my proper appellation, but it sounds eccentric—though why not 'grand-aunt' equally with 'grand-mamma,' I do not know. Society is terribly inconsistent. And so you are eighteen? I thought you were about that age, though you look older. London life certainly does not conduce to a healthy appearance. Do you never have a colour?"

"I had plenty of colour till all the trouble came not many weeks ago."

"I thought you gay town misses danced all your bloom away under the gas-lights, night after night."

"I had plenty, and it was almost the end of the season, till—till—but if you please, Aunt Dorothy, I had rather not talk about myself."

"Oneself is not often a profitable subject of conversation. Still, I should like to know a little about you. I will not touch upon anything painful, but I want to inquire whether you consider your education completed?"

"Oh, yes; quite. I left school just a year ago."

"And what have you been doing with yourself ever since?—I mean generally; I am not asking for confidences."

"What other young ladies of my age do, I suppose. I went, first of all, to Brighton—both there and in London I went out a good deal—and I took lessons in singing and Italian. I was not supposed to be properly 'introduced' till the spring, when I was presented. After that, I must confess, it was one round of gaiety and amusement, and Aunt Mowbray and I were thinking of Biarritz or Bagnères de Bigorre when—when everything was altered."

"And were you happy, dancing, singing, and playing day after day?"

"Very happy! So happy that it seems now like a lovely dream. But please, I cannot talk about it."

"You shall not until you wish it. I have only one thing more to ask—What have you done for God since you ceased to be a school-girl, and came to woman's estate, a year ago?"

"I hardly know. I went to church, of course, on Sundays, and I always gave at collections, and subscribed to charities; and last Easter I worked myself nearly to death at a bazaar for some orphan institution. Perhaps you think I ought to have visited the poor? Some of my friends did, and some of them went to church every day of the week; but I was not brought up to be religious, and somehow, I do not think going continually to church would have made me better in myself."

"Is that your idea of being religious—going continually to church?"

"I suppose something more is wanted—a moral life, for instance—but really, Aunt Dorothy, I have never thought about it."

"Did you not think, when suddenly your dream of pleasure vanished, when troubles overwhelmed you, when friends forsook, and those in whom you trusted proved faithless and unkind?"

"How do you know that friends forsook?"

"It is the way of the world—of that world in which you lived, the gay and thoughtless, the frivolous and careless world, which lives for the passing hour alone. Mind, I do not mean to abuse the world at large. The world is a good world, for it is God's world, and whether

we will or not, He is its King and Ruler. I have no sympathy, and very little patience, with those good folks who are for ever making their moan about this miserable earth, this vale of tears, this howling wilderness! If the world is a wilderness—which, God knows, it is, in spite of nineteen centuries of Christianity—why not set to work to cultivate it? Dear me, if everybody who shakes his or her head at this wicked world would just take one little portion of it, the little bit about his own doors, and try under God's blessing to make it better, to fight against the devil, and for King Jesus, then I think the wilderness would blossom as the rose, and there would be gladness and singing even in the desert. It is a great thing to be permitted to do God's work in this world, and it must be sad indeed to go into His presence and have nothing to report but a selfish, wasted life. And remember, child, God can do without you, though you cannot do without Him. Hilda, let the experience of the last few weeks show you that out of God there is no happiness, no rest, no *life* even, that is worth the name. In Him are peace and joy, in His presence is fulness of joy, at His right hand are pleasures for evermore."

"But does not that refer to another life? Are not those pleasures to be found only in heaven?"

"Child, what have you to do with heaven? If you went there to-day, what could you do with yourself? You do not love heaven's King, you are not His servant. Don't you think you would soon get very tired of singing the Hallelujah Chorus?"

"Yes," said Hilda, emphatically, "I have often thought I should. I am not like the good old German *Frau*, whose brightest anticipations of heaven were of sitting still, continually singing hymns, with folded hands, and a clean apron on. It is all very poetical about palms of glory, and white robes, and crowns and harps of gold, but ——"

"Child," interrupted Mrs. Dorothy, solemnly and almost sternly, "the palms are for the victors, the white robes are for those who have washed them and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, the crowns are for them who have fought the good fight and kept the faith,

the harps are for the hands that learned how to tune them when they hung upon the willows. What victory have you won? What has your conquest been? What do you know of Christ, the King of Glory? What is the everlasting song to *you*? For, Hilda, the crown will never fit your brows till you have borne the cross, nor will the strings of the golden harps ever respond to the touch of one whose heart is attuned only to earthly melodies."

C H A P T E R V I I I .

SATURDAY EVENING.

" Books are not seldom talismans and spells,
By which the magic art of shrewder wits
Holds an unthinking multitude enthralled.
Some to the fascination of a name
Surrender judgment hoodwink'd. Some the style
Infatuates, and through labyrinths and wilds
Of error leads them, by a tune entranced.
While sloth seduces more, too weak to bear
The insupportable fatigue of thought,
And swallowing, therefore, without pause or choice,
The total grist unsifted, husks and all."

IT was drawing on to evening when Hilda suddenly remembered that she had neither heard nor seen anything of the Arnisons, with whom she was to associate as little as possible. "They may be tradespeople," thought Hilda to herself, "and yet be none the worse; and then, as Aunt Dorothy farms and sells pigs, I don't see how I can stand out on any question of position, if these unknown cousins should make kindly advances. I wonder if they are often here."

They had dined in the middle of the day, to Miss Capel's great surprise, and now Barker, who generally waited at table when there were no visitors, was bringing in the tea-tray. Mrs. Dorothy was turning down the

heel of a stocking with the utmost exactitude. She was very proud of her knitting, and scorned to wear hose not of her own manufacture. She was again handsomely attired in rich black silk; fine lace mittens were on her still shapely hands, and on her third finger glittered diamonds of no trifling value. The farmereas had given place once more to the lady of the manor, and with the resumption of her patrician aspect had returned also to the Quaker form of speech. Hilda herself sat by the window, making belief to be busy with a piece of muslin embroidery, commenced about a year ago, and no good specimen of her power as a needlewoman.

"It is growing dusk," said Mrs. Dorothy, presently. "Do not try thy eyes with that messy bit of stuff. I wonder why none of thy cousins have been here to-day! Thou knowest, doubtless, that thou *hast* cousins, living in the town yonder?"

"Yes; my Aunt Mowbray told me of them."

"And hast thou never heard of them before?"

"To the best of my remembrance, never! I think I always knew I had some cousins somewhere, but I am sure I did not know their names."

"Thy mother and thy Aunt Mowbray never did approve of thy father's relations, but I cannot understand how they should let thee grow up to woman's estate without being cognisant of the name of thy kindred. The Arnisons are thy near relations; thy Aunt Rose is really nearer to thee than I am, for she is thy father's own sister, and her children are thy first cousins, who count next to sisters and brothers. However, thou wilt know them now, for they are generally backwards and forwards between this house and their own several times a day. I suppose they came not this day, because they thought thou mightest prefer to be undisturbed after thy long journey. They are good, considerate girls, thy cousins."

"Are there many of them, Aunt Dorothy?"

"No less than eleven! the eldest—Alice—is almost two-and-twenty; the youngest—bonny little Jack—will be three one day next week. Irene ought to be thy chief friend, she was eighteen a little while ago; I forget when, only I remember the dear child's birthday always comes

in real summer-time, just as the greengages are getting ripe."

Eleven cousins! And all so close at hand that Hilda might be, if she pleased, as one of them. What would they be like? She had prepared herself, from her Aunt Mowbray's suggestions, for mere rustic vulgarians, with whom it would be a penance to associate. But seeing how thoroughly aristocratic a personage was Aunt Dorothy, in spite of the farm and the pigs, she could not but entertain a hope that the Arnison girls might be "presentable;" it would make all the difference to her in this out-of-the-way place if she had congenial companions of her own age.

"Thou wilt see them all to-morrow—thy Uncle Oliver and thy Aunt Rose included; for we always dine, or rather lunch, at Indigo House on the Sabbath-day. Didst thou notice the church coming here last night?"

"Yes, I saw a very fine old church at the bottom of the town. Is that where you go on Sundays?"

"There is nowhere else to go, except it be to the Wesleyan chapel, half-way up the street, and they have no regular preacher there, and I confess I like to know what sort of spiritual meal I am bidden to. I do go to the chapel sometimes, as a duty, for I call myself a Dissenter; though, mark me, Hilda, I do not, on principle, adhere to any particular form of religion."

Hilda thought that was scarcely respectable, but of course she did not say so. Her only remark was, "I should have taken you for a Quaker, Aunt Dorothy."

"I do not belong to the Society of Friends, but I found great comfort with them, many years ago, when I was sore distressed in mind, and ever since I have loved them and their ways. Also, I cleave in heart to the Wesleyans, commonly called 'Methodists,' though I believe not in infant baptism. As for the Church of England—so called—I like its Liturgy, and should like it far better if it might be reformed—which it never will be while it is bound hand and foot by State manacles and fetters."

All this was as Greek and Hebrew to Hilda. Church history had not been included in her curriculum. She knew nothing about the Church of England, to which she

supposed herself to belong, except that it was highly respectable and Established by Act of Parliament; also that it had broken away some three centuries back from the Church of Rome, to which certain people seemed to think it was rapidly returning. Hilda was no Church-woman, except from inheritance and usage. At heart she was nothing; nor did it much matter what she was called, seeing that her worship so far was the merest matter of form and ceremony. The section of the State Church to which she naturally appertained counts many like her among its members. It was rather high and very dry; it equally ignored Protestant and Popish dissent; it disliked innovations, chiefly because it shrank from any disturbance of mind, and it only wanted to be let alone, to go its own dull, drowsy, highly respectable, and self-complacent way. It was not likely that Hilda should question the faith in which she had been trained, or, rather, to which she had been permitted and even encouraged to adhere. But she had come into a new world, where evidently she was expected to be something more than a nominal, unintelligent Christian, and she was interested, in spite of a certain amount of uneasiness and chagrin.

"What sort of reform would you propose, aunt?" she asked, after a short silence.

"In the first place, the service is too long. One is tired before the sermon commences. I suppose thou knowest that the English Church owes this burden of the flesh and spirit to that Popish Archbishop Laud, who would have Romanised the country if he could, and who helped to bring his unfortunate master to the block?"

No; Hilda knew nothing about it. She remembered that Laud had lived and died, expiating, like his royal master, his frauds and follies upon the scaffold. She had read no other history than Mrs. Markham's, and from that she had gained a general notion of national events, a few dates, and sundry anecdotes, resting on apocryphal authorities; nothing more.

"Well, then," continued Mrs. Dorothy, "I would return to the original form of service, as instituted, I believe, by Cranmer. Indeed, I am told that in large

towns the change is already, to a great extent, effected; and the Litany, which to my mind is worth all the rest of the ritual, is read sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening, so that all classes of the community may be able to join in it. Now, *here*, servants and others, who cannot well go out in the morning, never hear the Litany from January to December; and as there is no evening Communion, the same persons can only come very rarely, if at all, to the Lord's table. All that should be changed. Then I would alter some expressions, which really tend to confuse the uneducated masses; some petitions in some prayers I would have omitted, and others modified; I would consign the Athanasian Creed to oblivion, especially what are called the 'damnatory clauses'; and I would allow a blending of free prayer with the rubrical devotions."

"I think the Lord's Prayer is said too often in a single service."

"That is obviated when the three services which Laud so foolishly joined, for ulterior purposes of his own, are dissevered. I went to church one week evening in York, and the clergyman had the good sense to begin with the Litany. I never was so charmed in my life; and then the whole congregation repeated the Thanksgiving Prayer aloud. 'There!' said I to Irene Arnison, who was with me, 'that's something like a service!' It lasted, sermon and all, very little more than an hour, but it was real worship. When I came home, I took the liberty of asking our vicar to make trial of the same plan, but he remarked that such innovations were highly inexpedient, and savoured of restlessness and schism. In fact, his creed really is—'As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.' He told Mr. Arnison, afterwards, that I was '*a thorn in his side!*'"

Hilda thought that very possible; her aunt seemed to be as decided and energetic in theology as in farming and gardening. She had discovered that winter and summer she was never in bed after six o'clock in the morning. What a strange new life was this into which she had been so unwillingly thrust! And how would she ever accommodate herself to it when the novelty of things was past?

She remembered that Mrs. Mowbray had warned her that she must prepare herself to submit in every way to the old lady's fancies and opinions, unconditionally, and without demur; and as she seemed to have a great many fancies, and some very peculiar opinions, poor Hilda by no means enjoyed the prospect. How different from the graceful chatter and light converse of the London drawing-rooms to which she was accustomed, was this strange, grave discourse about churches, creeds, rubrics, pigs, cows, and winter cabbages! But she wanted to know something more about the Arnisons, and she inquired if they would expect her to luncheon on the morrow?

"Expect thee? certainly, child! Thou wouldst go to church, I suppose? and there is no time to come home here and return between services; besides, no regular dinner is prepared. I have a service of my own in the evening, with the house and farm servants, and the latter bring their wives, and elder children, if convenient. Thou canst play and sing, of course?"

"Yes, tolerably well, I have been told; but I never tried the organ, and I am not used to sacred music; I never practised any save the *Stabat Mater* and bits of Mozart's Masses."

"Dost thou never please thyself by playing hymn-tunes?"

"No, never; Aunt Mowbray did not like them, and one could not play them in society, you know. I had a friend who was fond of Gregorians, and now and then I have tried them with her, but I never cared about them."

"So much the better for thy taste!—miserable drawls, in a jumble of keys, and just up and down, and down and up again, only fit for droning monks and sleepy nuns. But surely thou didst sing in church?"

"Oh, no! We were never expected to join; the choir did all the singing. Aunt said it was not good form to sing in church."

"Good—what?"

Hilda repeated the phrase, and Mrs. Dorothy replied, "I did not expect thee would talk slang, coming from London, and from fashionable society."

"Slang *is* fashionable now, Aunt Dorothy."

"I suppose so, since all classes are more or less infected by it. I am always scolding thy cousins at Indigo House, because they are continually using slang phrases. Theodore teaches them, and they are only too ready to learn his lessons."

"Is Theodore my cousin?"

"Surely; he goes to school at York, and a very fine lad he is. Only yesterday, when Hyacinth and Olive were here, and it began to rain, they remarked that a certain expedition they were planning was *no go!* It is horrible."

Hilda made no reply, but it really cheered her to hear that the Arnisons could talk slang; she had somehow fancied them of the prim, proper, "papa-potatoes-prunes-and-prisms" type of girl—awfully good, and provokingly punctilious.

When tea was over, and the lamp was brought in, Hilda found to her dismay that it was little more than half-past six; what could she do with herself all the long, weary evening? She felt the greatest contempt for the limp, soiled piece of muslin she had in her hands, and, what was more, she really disliked needlework, never having been accustomed to do any unless it took her fancy; and when that did happen, rarely, if ever, bringing it to completion. She had often bought expensive pieces of Berlin work, already commenced, and she had trifled with them for a few hours, or, perhaps, for a few days, but they were always discarded, spoiled, or sent back to the shop to be finished and made up. Hilda's training had been the very opposite of that which she would have received had she been brought up by Mrs. Dorothy, instead of Mrs. Mowbray. She sighed as she watched her aunt's slender fingers move expertly to and fro, while the lamb's-wool stocking grew swiftly on the clicking, shining pins; she shuddered at the stillness, as the night deepened, and no sound broke the outer silence, except the low, solemn murmur of the autumn wind, and the faint rustle of the trees, while inside the house nothing was to be heard but now and then a faint footfall, or a door gently closing in the distance. Even the fire did not crackle, and the dog and cat, sleeping amicably together on the hearth-rug, gave few signs of life. Hilda almost envied the

animals their profound slumbers, and wearily longed for bedtime.

Occasionally Mrs. Dorothy started some subject of conversation, without, however, awakening Hilda's interest. Once she asked what book she had had in reading last, and Hilda could only reply that it was the latest novel. And then, taking courage, and resolved to talk about something, she ventured to say, "I suppose you do not approve of novels, Aunt Dorothy?"

"Why dost thou suppose so?"

"Because," stammered Hilda—"because I know many religious people think it is waste of time to read them."

"It is something worse than waste of time—it is downright *abuse* of time—to read some novels of the day, if all be true that I hear about them. But there are novels and novels, Niece Hilda, and some are good—very good—and some are bad—very bad—only fit for the flames. Novels are like meat; they ought to be wholesome and nourishing, and many of them are; while others ought to be seized by a moral inspector, condemned and destroyed, and their authors fined for diffusing that which is unfit for human *mental* food. How didst thou like the roast mutton on which we dined?"

"Very well; it was very good, and I had been out of doors so long, I was hungry."

"I am glad thou wast hungry, and that the mutton satisfied thee. That mutton was my own feeding; it was small and tender, and fine grained, and it had just hung long enough. Also it was well cooked. Now, if I had given thee tainted or diseased or tough meat, thou wouldest have complained, and justly—because unwholesome meat would surely make thee ill, and in no case nourish thee. And as I said, novels—books generally—are like food! Some kinds of food thou mayest eat of daily and freely; other kinds, though good, are not to be too much indulged in, inasmuch as they do not contain much of that which is necessary to building up and renewing the human body; others, again, are only for weakly constitutions, and some are absolutely poisonous to certain individuals, while yet they do not harm all alike. I myself cannot taste honey without suffering afterwards, and thy Uncle Arnison is

always ill if he touches mushrooms, of which, unfortunately, he is very fond. But, to answer thy question, I do approve of *good* novels—only I should be as sorry to read them exclusively as I should be to live on lemon cheesecake and strawberry cream. I have read all Walter Scott's, all Charles Dickens' novels, all Thackeray's, some of Mrs. Marsh's, and some of Miss Muloch's, with many more. What hast thou read?"

"I could not tell you—I have read so many. My friend, Mary Sandys, always told me I ought to read something deeper, and I dare say I should like biography and travels if I tried them. But so much depends on what one grows up to, and Aunt Mowbray did not like to see me poring over books; and then, when I began to go into society, there was little leisure for even light literature."

"Thou wilt find plenty of time here, and thou wilt find plenty of books; I have a good many from which thou shalt select, subject to my guidance; and they have an excellent library at Indigo House, for thy aunt, and thy uncle, and all their children are readers. Thou mightest read aloud to me in the evenings, which will be growing longer and longer; we shall seldom be from home, and I do not often have visitors. This evening is a fair specimen of those which are before thee."

Hilda sighed, but she signified her willingness to accede to her aunt's proposal, and Mrs. Dorothy resumed:—"Then we will begin next week. Of course thou hast read Sir Walter Scott's novels?"

"I cannot say I have; I began one or two and did not care for them; they were little better—some parts, at least—than actual history."

"And what history hast thou read?"

"I have read Mrs. Markham's 'England' and 'France,' nothing else. Oh! yes; the English governess at my Paris school used to make us read a little of Macaulay's history once a week, but we never got beyond the first few chapters."

"I wonder what sort of *physique* thou wouldest have if thou hadst eaten up till now only pannikin food and sweets, with a mouthful of beef or mutton here and

there, at long intervals? Why, child! didst thou not tell me thy education was finished? It seems to me that it is not properly begun. However, the gay world will trouble thee no more. Here thou mayest, and thou wilt if thou art a girl of sense, make up somewhat for lost time, and thy cousins can help thee. Alice, and Flossie, and Irene are really well-educated girls, and they are very good-natured, and will be pleased to do all they can for thee."

But Hilda had no idea of being beholden to "those Arnison girls," as she called them secretly to herself. It was utterly absurd; they might know more mere history, perhaps, and they might understand the *Use of the Globes*, which she never did, and never could, and, what was more, never wished to! But she wondered what they could say to her playing and singing! She had brought all the best of her music with her, and there must be a piano somewhere—at Indigo House (what an absurd name!), if not at the Grey House. Then, what was their French and German good for, learned probably in some third or fourth rate country school? Above all, what could they know of the tone and manners of "society;" how could they possibly attain that matchless grace and self-possession which is to be found only in the upper ten thousand? It was absurd to talk of these country girls as her superiors, and if they attempted any patronage, or if they flaunted their wonderful wisdom and education before her, she thought a few disdainful words and a stately coldness would soon convince them of their mistake.

For without actually propounding the idea to herself, Hilda had certainly anticipated something like satisfaction in the display of her own perfections as a girl of high breeding, and blessed with educational and social advantages such as they had not even imagined! She had certainly had some vague notion of improving *them*, if she found they were susceptible of improvement. It was simply ridiculous to suppose these country cousins could be of any use to her except in the way of amusement *pour passer le temps*. Hilda felt seriously displeased at Mrs. Dorothy's proposition. How could she, buried among

her cows and pigs and poultry, and going once a-year to York for dissipation, have the remotest idea of what was necessary to the education of a young gentlewoman who was to move in the best circles ! Mrs. Dorothy, whose perceptions were of the keenest, saw her annoyance, and was much amused. " Well, then," she said, " that is settled ; we will begin with one or two of Sir Walter Scott's novels, which I have not opened for years ; afterwards we will try Froude. Thou knowest Froude as a writer, perhaps ? "

" Did he not write a History of England ? "

" Rather the history of a period from the accession of Henry VIII. to the death of Elizabeth. No one writes history now, as in the days of my youth, when the historian began with the ancient Britons, and ended with the reigning sovereign, and all in the compass of a few hundred pages. Compendiums are useful for school-children in the lower classes, and for reference ; that is all they are really good for."

" I suppose my cousins speak German and French ? " asked Hilda, feeling at the same time tolerably sure that they did not. And again Mrs. Dorothy perfectly understood the tone and movement of the proud young head. She quietly replied :— " Of course they do ; they could scarcely do less. They read and speak German well, I am told ; but French is to them as their native language, I suppose : the elder girls have been so much in Paris."

" Indeed ! At school ? "

" They attended school, doubtless, but thy uncle—perhaps thou dost not know it—is a great chemist and a man of science, and he has a French partner, and Alice and Flossie have been much with his wife, a charming woman, who often visits Endlestone ; and young Michaud—M. Louis, we call him—has been here for the last eighteen months. When he first arrived at Indigo House, he could not speak English at all, though he was a very fair German scholar. Even now, he will never speak English with thy cousins, and that is, of course, an advantage to them."

So then, after all, it was possible, and indeed probable, that these " Arnison girls " were as accomplished as her-

self. "Do they play?" she asked, with much less self-complacency in her voice.

"They play well, but not as I played in my young days, I think. You will hear Flossie to-morrow; she plays the organ at the church, though sometimes Irene takes her place. We never could prevail on Alice to touch the keys in public. Your Aunt Rose is no mean performer; her music is old-fashioned, but it is good,—*good* in every sense of the word!"

And so the evening wore away, rather speedily to Mrs. Dorothy, who was bent on finishing her stocking, and wearily to Hilda, who yawned in spite of every effort, and watched the antique timepiece, wondering at what hour she would be free to retire to her own room. Exactly at the stroke of nine entered Barker with the supper-tray. There were slices of cold mutton, with bread and cream cheese, and a tumbler of new milk for Hilda, and porridge for Mrs. Dorothy. "And I take a little sherry-negus, my dear—the only thing, you know," said the old lady, as she laid down her spoon, "*after worship*." Hilda, though tired and bored, was curious to see what this "*worship*" could be like.

The supper-tray removed, a short interval elapsed, during which Mrs. Dorothy sat with her hands on her knees, and her eyes closed. But for the animated, almost rapt, expression of her countenance, Hilda would have thought she dozed. In a few minutes Barker returned, and arranged the chairs in a double row on one side of the room. She also lighted the candles at the organ, placed a Bible and a tune-book on the table, and again withdrew. Mrs. Dorothy rubbed her spectacles, and opened first the sacred volume, and then the tune-book, which she carried to the desk of the organ, at the same time drawing the candle-stands into position. "Ring," she said to Hilda, as she took her seat at the organ.

The servants filed in—Hilda was surprised to find how many. They took their seats, and their mistress gave out the well-known hymn, "Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear." It was sung to the tune with which we are all so familiar, and then Mrs. Dorothy read part—only part—of the 15th chapter of St. John's Gospel. Afterwards she

prayed,—“without any book,” as Hilda remarked; and the girl was astonished to hear how much was asked for, how simply, how fervently, how confidingly,—that all would be granted according to the wise and loving will of “Our Father who art in heaven.”

Strange to say, Hilda was less mentally tired when she rose from her knees than when she commenced the long, dull evening. She was, however, really fatigued; yesterday's long journey, and all the painful occurrences of the last few weeks, were beginning to tell upon her, both physically and mentally. She had spent the morning, too, in the open air, which was bracing and stimulating, and consequently rather enervating at present to one entirely new to it. She could scarcely keep her eyes open while she undressed, and she was thankful to find herself at last in the old four-poster; the next moment she was in the land of dreams.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLUE HOUSE.

“‘Sleep, sleep to-day, tormenting cares
Of earth and folly born,’
Solemnly sang the village choir
On that sweet Sabbath morn.”

SUNDAY morning rose cool and clear. When Hilda opened her window, a little before eight o'clock, the mists were melting from the hill-sides, the grass was white with pearly dew, and countless gossamers twinkled about the *noisette* roses. Anything so calm and still she had never imagined; only the redbreast warbled his “cheerful, tender strain” on a laurustinus bush below, a few rooks sailing over a distant meadow cawed solemnly, and a pleasant sound of church bells was borne upon the breeze. Of course they must be the Endlestone bells—as Mrs.

Dorothy had said there was no other church within reach, and the wind came that way. The very flowers and leaves, the softly-tinted sky, the grey hollows of the hills, the far-off, lonely peaks, all seemed to say that it was Sunday morning. The spirit of peace brooded over all the quiet landscape with its woodland lawns and autumn-tinted bowers and girdling rocky fells. And yet Hilda only felt the sadder for the calm, sweet beauty on which her eyes were resting. She felt a sudden impatience, an irrepressible longing, for the busy, fashionable world she had left behind. To live here at Endlestone would *not* be life; it would be mere existence, she told herself. The excitement of removal and change had nearly spent itself; the novelty of her surroundings was fast ceasing to interest her; she remembered the long dreary evening and the morning walk among the pigs and cows, and her heart sank within her.

"How shall I bear it?" she cried, despairingly. "How shall I live this uncongenial life which is forced upon me, from which I see no prospect of escape? I shall never love Aunt Dorothy—*never!* I may respect her, I may grow to reverence her; but she is too cold, too stern and formal, ever to excite affection. I think she means to be kind, and I suppose I ought to be very thankful that she is willing to take me in, out of pure charity, for I have really no claim on her. Alas! I have no claim on any living person! I am alone—all alone in the world. And yet, a little while ago, I thought I had so much love; and, above all, that fond love that was to be mine while life lasted. Where now are all my summer-weather friends? Where my false lover? Oh, Horace, if only *you* had been true to me, I could have borne without a murmur all other desertions; I could have smiled at reverse of fortune, for though I love scenes of gaiety, and detest this hum-drum country life that is before me, I don't think I am what is called 'worldly-minded,' and I had rather be happy than be gay, and I should not care to shine, if only I could please one dearest and best-beloved one. Oh! what had I done—poor, simple girl that I was!—that God should visit me with such bitter sorrow, such pain, such loss of everything I cherished! And I can never, never, *never* be

happy again. Oh, hateful Endlestone! Stupid, dull, horrible Grey House. Grey, *indeed!* Grey as the leaden clouds on a dark November afternoon; grey inside, and outside, and everywhere!"

Just then Hilda heard the organ downstairs, and yet the prayer-bell had not rung. She listened; but there was only a single voice—a thin, clear, high soprano—singing a well-known hymn-tune. She went down, and saw her aunt at the organ alone. Mrs. Dorothy did not hear her enter, she went on with her singing, and it was wonderful how full and strong, and still sweet, were her notes; there was a very slight quaver, just a little wiriness, in the upper notes. Hilda had heard women full twenty years younger, with carefully-trained voices, sing no better, nor yet as well, as this countrified old lady, with no audience except herself, unnoticed, and the cat and dog sitting gravely, one on each side of the mistress.

And strangely distinct were the words of the singer. Hilda could hear them every one, as clearly as though they had been read aloud. As she entered, and quietly seated herself, one verse was concluded with a soft, low chord, and after a moment's pause another was commenced:—

“‘Blessed day when earthly sorrow
Is merged in heavenly joy,
And trial changed to blessing
That foes may not destroy;
When want is turned to fulness,
And weariness to rest,
And woe to wondrous rapture,
Upon the Saviour’s breast.

“‘Lord, we would bring for offering,
Though marred with earthly soil,
A week of earnest labour,
Of steady, faithful toil;
Fair fruits of self-denial,
Of strong, deep love to Thee,
Fostered by Thine own Spirit
In meek humility.’”

And then the music suddenly ceased, and the great bell in the hall rang out for morning worship. Prayers were a little later than usual. Breakfast followed, and afterwards Mrs. Dorothy said, “As it is so fair a morning,

Niece Hilda, I think we shall enjoy the walk into the town. I use the carriage when necessary, but I am always glad when it may be dispensed with; I like my people and my beasts to keep Sunday as well as myself. And as we shall start betimes, thou hadst best prepare thyself immediately."

Hilda obeyed, and they were soon on their way to Endlestone, taking a shorter road than that which conveyances generally followed. How beautiful the lanes were, the hedges still green, though touched here and there with russet brown and gold, garlanded with scarlet briony berries, and festooned with purple brier sprays, on which the juicy fruit hung rich and ripe, and almost as fine as mulberries. Not far off, a babbling stream rippled over mossy stones, now and then bursting into a tiny waterfall, as some piece of lichen-covered rock obstructed the bright wavelets hurrying from their mountain cradle to mingle with the broader waters of the Endle river.

Hilda could not but confess to herself that the scene was very lovely; nevertheless, as was but natural, her heart yearned for London streets and London pavements, for the bare horse-chestnuts in Kensington Gardens, for the leafless limes and dusty planes of Hyde Park! London was home, and Endlestone was a foreign land—a land of exile and loneliness!

"Dost thou like blackberries?" asked Mrs. Dorothy, seeing Hilda look towards the luscious, tempting clusters just within her reach.

"I don't know. I am not sure that I ever tasted any—any that were really ripe, that is. I found some once on Putney Heath, or Wimbledon Common, but they were red and hard and sour. No; I never gathered a *ripe* blackberry."

"Country blackberries and Cockney blackberries are two different things. Thou must have had a most artificial childhood not to care for blackberries or nuts. But thy cousins will take thee with them into the woods and lanes; they have had their grand annual blackberrying, I know, but there are plenty left, and the nutting season has hardly yet commenced. Doubtless the girls will inaugurate a little pic-nic, especially in thy honour."

Hilda wondered what else these wonderful cousins of hers would do for her. Pic-nics, indeed! The idea of their getting up a pic-nic on her account—they, whose only ideas on such a subject could be but of baskets of provisions, gooseberry-pop, and a kettle boiled in the open air, gipsy fashion. And she had been made much of at Chiswick, and at Fulham, and at Richmond Hill, and had joined in all the delights of an aristocratic water-party up the Thames to Cliveden.

About half-a-mile further on, the lane widened into an upland heath, nearly covered with brambles, fern, and furze; and below them was the town, with its grey castle at the top, and its greyer church at the bottom, close on the river banks. Green meadow-lands, through which the river, like a broad thread of silver, wound its way towards the sea, lay beyond, and the mountains and fells shut all in with their mighty battlements. The bells were chiming merrily, and Mrs. Dorothy said, "We must quicken our pace, child, or we shall be late; we shall hear the tolling-in bell directly. Put thy best foot foremost."

A few minutes brought them into the High Street, and then Hilda ventured to ask, "Shall we meet my cousins before we go into church?"

"Verily, I think not; for their house is out there, on the other side the church. Thou seest that large stack of building, partly of wood and partly of stone, close upon the river's brink? Well, those are thy uncle's dye-works; and Indigo House joins on to the works."

"What made them call it 'Indigo House'?"

"That has been its name for two generations; I suppose they who gave it its name were not ashamed of their trade. But thy cousins are fond of calling it 'The Blue House,' as I call mine 'The Grey House.' The twins and Theodore must have their joke. Even Alice and Flossie date their letters from 'The Blue House.' Ah! there are thy Aunt Rose and her husband, just entering the south porch; and the two children with them are Stella and Olive. Master Jacky is too young to go to church. His nurse took him a few Sundays back to the Wesleyan chapel—it was only a short afternoon service; and in the middle of the sermon he cried

out to one of his father's workmen, whom he recognised, 'Make them sing again, Tim; I so tired of that man's preach!' And as the young gentleman, who has his own way rather too much, I am afraid, persisted in his appeal to Timothy, he had to be withdrawn from the congregation."

By this time the ladies were in the porch, and they could hear the organ; service was just about to commence. In fact, they had barely settled themselves in the pew, when the congregation rose up at the sound of "When the wicked man," &c., and Hilda found herself provided with an immense Prayer-book, evidently of ancient date, King George III. and his Queen Charlotte being the sovereigns who figured in all the petitions for the Royal Family. Hilda wondered which of the Arnison girls was presiding at the organ, which, however, was only played for the *Venite*, the *Jubilate*, and the hymns, the vicar strongly objecting to too much music. Even the *Te Deum* was read alternately by parson and clerk, the people doing but little in the way of responding. During the reading of the Psalms, she looked about her, and was a good deal confused to perceive that many of her fellow-worshippers were looking at her. Clearly her appearance there was an event, strangers not being often at Endlestone Church. Her eyes quickly fell, but not before she had seen the Arnison pew, which was full to overflowing. Yes! there they were; Mr. and Mrs. Arnison seated side by side, in good old Darby and Joan fashion; several tall girls at first glance very much alike; some smaller ones, and a tall, square-shouldered young man, with a dark complexion and un-English type of face. It could not be the lad Theodore, who was still a schoolboy; it was probably the Frenchman, M. Louis Michaud, of whom mention had been made. Hilda decided that he was plain almost to ugliness, and was sure she should dislike him.

There was nothing particular in the service, which was fully compounded of course, after the regular Laudian usage. The sermon was still less interesting; it was tame and formal in itself, and drowsily delivered. Hilda did not even take the trouble to listen to it. Mrs.

Dorothy, and a few others about her, gave respectful attention to the preacher; the congregation, as a whole, were listless and uninterested. Most of them had heard the discourse before—many of them, indeed, had heard it over and over again, for it was one of the vicar's "*set of sermons*," which he preached in regular turn year after year—"a very fine set!" a few of his admirers were wont to say, for it consisted of over *two hundred* discourses, and with the addition of a few extra sermons for feasts, fasts, and festivals, was warranted to hold good for two years of Sundays and holy-days. And Mr. Crofts, at Ellingham, had only just enough to last from Advent to Advent; while old Mr. Doolittle, of Thursbay, who was a remarkably absent gentleman, and very much absorbed in mundane pursuits, was limited to a still smaller selection, and had been known to preach harvest sermons at Christmas-time, and to favour his flock with Lenten homilies just when the corn was ripe, without discovering his absurd mistake. It was even said that he had made use of an old Gunpowder-Plot sermon on a certain occasion, when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel required an annual collection. Therefore, the Vicar of Endlestone, with his *two hundred* sermons, was generally applauded as a clever, learned, orthodox, and praiseworthy divine.

The service ended, the congregation made haste to disperse—all but a few, the magnates of the place, Hilda supposed, who lingered after the others, the Arnisons and her Aunt Dorothy being of the number. They were no sooner in the graveyard, which was a wide and venerable "God's Acre," sloping gently down to the river-side, than Hilda found both her hands seized in those of an elderly gentleman, with rather a loud voice, who cried out, "Here she is, lassies! here's your Cousin Hilda! Now, don't all rush at her at once! and I dare say in London she is not used to be kissed in public. Keep off, Octa! and Stella, where's your mother? Oh, talking to poor Granny Rigg, as usual, and there are more old women waiting to have a word with madam; we'll walk on, we won't wait; and Lily, run down to Lucky Lawson's, and tell her to send to the Blue House for her mother's dinner; we've something

to suit the old lady to-day, I think. There's grouse-pie, and I know she does like a relish. Come along, Hilda, I'll take care of you; Rosie and Cynthia have got Aunt Dolly in their clutches. Follow us, girls, or perhaps one of you might wait for Lill. Now then, Hilda, my dear, through the cloisters—that's our shortest cut."

It seemed like a dream, being taken possession of in this way, and yet not at all unpleasant. And just as they came to the end of the fine old cloisters, and were turning into the street again, Mr. Arnison stopped short, looked in Hilda's face, and softly stroked the hand tucked beneath his arm.

"Poor child!" he said, with an intense pity shining out of his kind brown eyes. "You have had a great and bitter sorrow; don't think we haven't felt for you, but we all thought it best not to tease you with letters, as we were such utter strangers. We'll do all we can to make you happy, though we cannot, I know, make up for what is lost. But the good Lord can, Hilda, my dear, and He will comfort you with the best of all comfort."

Hilda, taken by surprise, could not speak—the large tears came into her eyes, and choked her voice; without knowing what she did, she clung closer to this new uncle's arm. She felt a sudden trust and rest in him, such as she might have felt had she found a true father's arm around her, and a sudden sense of protection that lifted much of the depression that had weighed upon her so heavily all the morning.

In a few minutes the short distance between the church and Indigo House was traversed, and Hilda found herself in a spacious, rather low-ceiled drawing-room, handsomely though plainly furnished, with three large French windows—evidently a modern improvement—opening on to a velvet lawn, green as emerald, and now strewn over with dead and dying leaves of every hue. A magnificent cedar of Lebanon drooped its stately branches on the closely-shaven sward, and there were others, further away, on what seemed to be a second lawn; there was a grand old mulberry-tree, on which a little fruit still lingered, and many ornamental shrubs of vigorous growth—the Portugal-laurels and laurustini being really a spectacle in

their immense size and healthy luxuriance. All around were bright flower-beds, bounded by grey walls that were perfectly mantled with moss, scale, and parsley ferns, lichens, and different kinds of antirrhinum. At some distance from the house, and in the centre of the vast lawn, was a venerable stone sun-dial, all draped with delicate ivy-leaved toad-flax, and its pedestal overgrown with plump fronds of limestone polypody, intermingled with that rare and loveliest of ferns, the *Cystopteris fragilis*.

The room itself was charming. It was clearly a room in which people lived—not one of those dismal state-apartments which are only inhabited on Sundays, or for purposes of reception. There was a good deal of old-fashioned needlework about it—probably the production of Mrs. Arnison in her maiden-days; indeed, most of the furniture was of a bygone date, the only really modern thing being a grand pianoforte, evidently “with all the latest improvements,” and of fullest compass. And if all the music that was heaped about it was frequently played, the piano’s excellences would be well tested.

Here all the family gathered, out-door costume being hastily laid aside; and here, too, came Aunt Rose, the latest arrival. She was a little woman, about forty-five years of age, but looking younger; she was plump, fresh, and fair, with a lovely blush-rose tint on her still rounded cheeks; with tender, trusting eyes, and the sweetest little mouth imaginable. She folded the tall Hilda in her motherly arms, as well as she could, and said, “My dear child, we are so glad to have you among us. My girls would have gone to you yesterday, but I thought it was too soon to disturb you. And you walked in this morning? How tired you must be, and how hungry! Alice, give your cousin a glass of wine.”

But Hilda excused herself; she would rather wait till dinner or luncheon was ready; she was not at all tired after the long rest in church.

Then Mr. Arnison took up his parble again, introducing his children, of whom he seemed wonderfully proud. “Here!” said he, taking the hand of a sweet-featured, fair-complexioned girl, rather taller than her mother;

"this is Alice, our eldest, Hilda ; a really *good* girl, though I say it that shouldn't say it, you know ! And this is Flossie, almost as tall as I am, and her father's own daughter, so people declare ; and as she is very naughty, as a rule, and shockingly mischievous, common report for once speaks truth, I fancy. And this is Irene, our child of peace, and she well deserves her name. There are our twins, Lilian and Rosamond, generally known as Lily and Rosie. Theodore, our big boy, comes next, but he is away at school, bless him ! Next Cynthia, all legs and arms. What do you say, Pickle?—your real name is Hyacinth ! So it is ! Miss Capel, I beg to present to you Miss Hyacinth Arnison, a young lady who climbs trees and leaps fences as cleverly as if she were of the *superior sex* ! *Ahem* ! I wonder at my own daring, surrounded as I am by a good round dozen of womankind. This girl with long plaits of hair is Octavia, our eighth trouble, saucy Miss Octa. These two, so much of a size, and like enough to be twins, are Stella and Olive. And here comes Jacky"—as a fine boy of three rushed in by the window, and into his father's arms—"this is our baby, Hilda. You have just come to make up our dozen. I always tell mamma eleven is an awkward number, but she tells me there's luck in odd numbers ; I am sure I don't know. Now, child, you know us all, and the Blue House is to be your home as well as the Grey House. Mamma, are they not a little late with luncheon ?"

The luncheon was really a dinner, only all the dishes were on the table at once, and they waited upon themselves. It was all cold, except the potatoes, and Alice explained this was a family custom. "Only," she added, "in winter, in cold weather, rather, we have hot soup, and that, of course, is got ready on Saturday, and whoever is at home puts the meat-pies in the oven, and, as cook says, 'just *hots* them up.' Mamma and papa like the servants to have Sunday pretty much to themselves."

"Will Hilda take a class ?" was the next speech from one of the younger girls.

Hilda looked alarmed, and Mrs. Arnison said, "Not to-day, at any rate, she must be so tired ; and perhaps she is not used to Sunday-schools."

Hilda knew there were such things, for she had read about them, and subscribed to them; of course she had never even imagined it possible that she could be connected with one. Flossie said, "No, no, Octa; it is too bad to pounce at once upon a new comer. We will find Hilda work when she wants it, and not before. Ah, here's Louis! I was to tell you he walked home with Harry Baskerville, to get some of their grapes for poor Sally Dent; ours are not quite ripe."

The stalwart young man whom Hilda had noticed in the pew, and whose absence she had not remarked, now walked in, and was introduced by Mr. Arnison as "M. Louis Michaud, my partner's son." He bowed like a Frenchman, rather stiffly, Hilda thought, and again she decided that he was almost, if not quite, ugly. He took his seat with alacrity, and began to talk about the invalid for whom he had fetched the grapes. There was no lack of conversation, and though everybody was in the best spirits, and cheerfulness abounded, there was nothing like levity or trifling, and the meal was not prolonged, because the elder girls were anxious to start for the Sunday-school, which was conducted in an outbuilding of Mr. Arnison's, from two to three, when the afternoon service commenced.

The vicar, it appeared, did not patronise Sunday-schools, but he did not interfere with the Arnisons, as they collected children on their own premises, and paid all costs themselves, and, moreover, never kept them from any service of the church. All the girls, except the two youngest, speedily vanished, followed by M. Louis, who seemed to have his class, like the others; and last of all Mr. Arnison took his departure, explaining that he was working superintendent. Stella and Olive went off to the nursery with Jacky, and Hilda was left alone with her aunts Dorothy and Rose.

CHAPTER X.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON.

" There are in this loud stunning tide
 Of human care and crime,
With whom the melodies abide
 Of the everlasting chime;
Who carry music in their heart,
Through dusty lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat."

AND both the aunts indulged in a little nap, while Hilda sat, almost afraid to stir, on a low chair by the window, with an open volume on her knees—a volume in which she could not find anything to interest her, as it was a treatise on the *Textile Arts*, about which she had never in the least concerned herself. She looked out into the beautiful garden, and wished she were there, in those shady walks, under the spreading cedar, or among those brightly-coloured beds and borders, where blossomed every lovely scion of the soft Indian summer. The velvet turf looked tempting, there were vistas seen between the arching trees and through the thinning foliage of the copper-beeches, green banks, and towering shrubs, bowery nooks, glimpses of a fernery, an avenue of tall, stately elms, and something that glistened and shimmered not very far off like falling water.

" I should so like to go out there," she thought to herself, as she listened to the ticking of the clock on the mantel-piece, and to the gentle breathing of the sleepers. "I wonder if I might venture! Oh, yes, I am sure I might; this seems to be a very free, comfortable, and informal household. Uncle Arnison is wonderfully nice, and Aunt Rose looks charming. If I could only slip away without disturbing those two! I am tired myself, but not in the least sleepy. Let me see if I can unfasten the window."

No sooner said than done; the catch was a very simple

one, and went quite easily, and in another minute Hilda was in the open air and under the beautiful cedar which she had so much admired. It was the grandest specimen of the kind she had ever seen ; its dark, graceful branches swept the emerald sward for an immense circumference, and on the higher boughs hung clusters of fine full purplish cones.

"What a beautiful tree !" cried Hilda, as if to some bystander. "I could not have imagined anything so splendid ; I feel as if I were looking up into some solemn cathedral dome. It is like being in a church. Surely there is something about cedars in the Bible. Oh, yes ! the cedars of Lebanon, of course, that were used for the building of Solomon's temple ; and there is something else, I am pretty sure, only I cannot remember. If I am to hear the Bible read every morning and every evening, I shall soon know rather more about it. How strange this new life is ! All those things which I have been taught to consider of the greatest importance ignored, as it were ; and those things about which I have never so much as concerned myself, made paramount. At least, they are somehow mixed up with everything ! These Grey House and Blue House people seem to have interwoven their religion with their common life—a sort of woof and warp fabric, so intermingled that they fall to pieces if separated. It's very odd ; I am not sure but that I may come to like it. There's something grand in being really earnest."

After which soliloquy, Hilda strolled away across another lawn into a beautifully kept garden, where the trim box-edged borders were brilliant with asters, dahlias, late roses and stocks, verbenas, scarlet geraniums, and heliotropes, gay nasturtiums, French marigolds, and scarlet salvias, with many other flowers of the lingering summer and the early autumn side by side. Then she came to a long, straight terrace, bounded on one side by a stone wall, on which fruit-trees were trained, and on the other by a sloping bank of finest turf, at the bottom of which was a small parterre full of the choicest flowers, and a large pond covered with water-lilies, water-plantain, arrow-head, and other familiar aquatic plants. At the

end of this mossy walk was a wilderness, the resort of every wild flower and fern of the district, with some others that were not indigenous to the soil. It was, indeed, a lovely garden—a garden of old romance, a garden that might have its own stories of the past, of the present, and of the days to come. Hilda wondered whether her cousins had any lovers, whether they had already learned any of those life-lessons which only the heart's experience can teach. The sweet Alice, the brilliant Florence, the gentle, calm-browed Irene—what did they know of the turmoil and trouble and strange reverses that were in the world? They seemed, Hilda thought, almost like happy children, upon whom no shadow of care had fallen. She herself felt quite old; her youth had faded from her, she scarcely knew how; she seemed years older than these fair girls, and yet she was younger than Alice and Flossie, and only several months Irene's senior.

The church bells were ringing for afternoon service, and close at hand rose the grand old tower from whence the music came. The daws and rooks, roused by the pleasant sound, began wheeling round and round the grey tall battlements, and about the elms that shaded from view the factories and dye-houses. There was quite a concert of robin redbreasts, and just a little soft rustle among the apple-trees, near which Hilda had paused to listen. Ought she not to return to the house and accompany her aunts to church? Two services a day would be a novelty to her, and it might—nay, possibly would—be expected of her. And yet she was really tired, and felt little inclined to join the congregation now assembling. While she was debating what she should do, she saw one of her cousins approaching; which of them she scarcely knew, but she thought it must be Irene.

"Are you come to look after the runaway?" she said, as cheerfully as she could, but feeling a little cross in spite of herself at the idea of so close a supervision.

"No," replied Irene, for it was she. "Mamma and aunt told me you were somewhere in the gardens, and Aunt Dorothy said she supposed you were not going to church again this afternoon. It is the law of Indigo

House that we all go in the morning, unless prevented by illness, but we, the grown-up children, at least, may please ourselves in the afternoon; for papa has a service of his own in the evening, though when there is a collection several of us are expected to show ourselves at the Wesleyan chapel, in the Wynd yonder."

"But you are not Wesleyans?"

"Strictly speaking, certainly not. You see we are a little unfortunate at Endlestone; we cannot care much for the services of the church, though we do try to make the very best of them. And we cannot quite settle ourselves at the chapel, though papa sometimes says he is not sure but that it is our duty—such of us as could conscientiously do it—to join with the Wesleyans here, who are doing nearly all the work that is done in the place. Our vicar will not allow us to labour with him; he is at least fifty years behind his own Church of England. Still, papa and mamma, having both been brought up Church people, cling to the old habits and usages; and if Mr. Peters would only interest himself in something beyond fishing and gardening, grudging everything that is over and above the two Sunday services, and those of Christmas Day and Good Friday—I think we should all be content."

"You are not going to church this afternoon?"

"No; school has given me a headache; the room was very full and warm, and the children rather noisy, so I came out here for the cool air. It is not my Sunday at the organ."

"You are Irene, are you not?"

"Yes; I dare say you are confused at first—so many of us. Do you like to stay out, or shall we return to the house?"

"I like to stay here; it is so sweet and calm, and quite warm for the season."

"This is generally a delightful time in the North-country, only the mornings and evenings are cold. There have been sharp frosts on the hills and in the open for the last few nights."

"But your garden looks lovely."

"We are very much sheltered here, and we have been

at great pains to plant out certain banks and ridges, so as to protect our tenderest flowers from the keenest blasts. All that thicket of evergreens has grown up since I was a little thing ; it protects all those beds and the border below them. Besides, things get acclimatised, I fancy. It is very difficult to keep the clematis alive here through the winter, and yet we have succeeded hitherto in defending ours, and every year they grow stronger and stouter."

"I wonder if I shall ever be acclimatised, Irene ?"

"I hope so. It will not come all at first, perhaps—things that are best seldom do, I think ; but I do believe you will be happy here—some day."

"And you, and your sisters—this quiet life pleases you ? You are content to waste your sweetness on the desert air ?"

"Such sweetness as we have is not wasted. We are quite happy as a family. I do not say we never have our little troubles and vexations, but we are peacefully content, quietly, sweetly happy, *thank God*." And the two last words were spoken reverently, and as if from the fulness of a heart at peace with Him. There was something in the tone and look that caught and riveted Hilda's attention. What could be the secret of the peace which so manifestly shone on Irene's girlish face and echoed in her quiet voice ?

"You seem so happy, all of you," said Hilda, with the tears rising in her eyes, and a pain at her heart that she scarcely comprehended.

"And—you are not ?" asked Irene, with a sort of tender respect, that softened poor Hilda's proud, rebellious spirit.

"I, happy ? Oh, Irene, how can I be ? You must know something of what has befallen me ? I do not expect ever to be really happy again. If I can only endure and be patient, I must be content."

"Dear cousin, I know you have had very great troubles —mamma said it was almost enough to kill you. But after many a spring-storm, you know, there comes sweet sunshine and the blessed summer warmth. God our Father means us to be happy ; it is His will."

"Irene," replied Hilda, almost fiercely, "I have heard that—that—I was almost going to say, that *jargon* before! Don't be angry with me, but it seems to me that when people talk in that strain, they don't at all understand what they are talking of. What do you know of unhappiness? Should the fostered greenhouse flowers preach patience to those who are buffeted by all the winds of heaven? How would it be if they were suddenly turned out of their warm habitat, and flung upon the first way-side heap, to live or die, according to the strength within them? No, no; I *cannot* feel that God is good—that God is kind. Would you love your own father if, from no fault of yours, he should to-morrow turn you out of your pleasant home, sever you from all family ties, and send you forth, penniless and bare, to beg your bread? Yet, that is what God has done for me. Ah! you are shocked, I see; but wait till you also are desolate and smitten."

The girls were sitting now in a summer-arbour at the end of a terrace which overlooked the lower lawns and the Blue House itself.

Irene made no answer, but she covered her face for a moment, and asked God to tell her what she should say to this poor, unhappy, stricken Cousin Hilda. "O Lord! give me words," was the unuttered cry of her inmost heart. "I have nothing of my own to say to her, and yet I want to comfort her; and I *must* speak for Thee."

Hilda watched her closely, strongly suspecting how she was engaged.

"Well," she said impatiently, when Irene laid her hands in her lap, "what have you to reply? Can a God who inflicts so much misery be *kind*?"

"I think—nay, I am sure—we cannot rightly judge of God's dealings with us any more than little babies can judge of their parents' discipline. It is not so long since Jacky found a fine piece of glittering coloured glass, and he kept it with his playthings, and we did not know, till one day mamma discovered the dangerous treasure, and took it away. Poor little Jacky stamped, and screamed, and bewailed himself, and thought mamma was very cruel; but she was *not*. It would have been far more

cruel to let the child keep his sharp-edged toy till he wounded himself with it. There was one particular splinter that might have cut his dear little hand to the bone. May not God be like that, seeing, as He does see, all that lies before us, and knowing, as He does know, what really is for our eternal happiness?"

"But aunt did not *give* Jacky the broken glass. He got it without her knowing it. God gave me friends and riches and all the pleasures of this world, and then He took them away, as if in mockery."

"No, dear, no! the dear Lord never mocks even the feeblest and frailest of His creatures. Are you sure that you did not take some of the things you had—take them as a matter of course, without even thinking whence they came? Perhaps God let you have them awhile, and then He saw your heart was so full of them there was no room in it for Him. And so He took them away, that presently He might give you what was infinitely better. I don't know much about life, Hilda—not half so much as you do—but I do know God is good; I do know that God is *love*."

"Why does He not comfort me, then? My heart is so sore."

"He is waiting even now to comfort you, to give you peace and rest. But even He cannot comfort you while you harden your heart against the Comforter."

"I was so happy! How happy, Irene, you cannot even guess! I had heard of cups of bitterness, and I know now what it means; but up to one awful day, one miserable hour, I had tasted only the sweet, bright wine of joy. Oh! I have learned a great deal since that evening; I have learned the uncertainty of all earthly things, the faithlessness of woman, and the falsehood of man. I have learned to distrust my fellow-creatures, to *despise* some of them; I have learned that the world of fashion, which wears so gay an outside, is all rottenness within—that it is, as Moore says,

"All a fleeting show,
For man's illusion given!"

"Ah! we learned that for a lesson once, Flossie and I.

Mamma used to let us choose our own hymns and poems always, and she told us that those lines were written by a man who had not found out the true secret of life—by one who was very much like Weary-o'-the-World, in the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress.’ And she said, if it had been ‘for man’s probation given,’ it would have been much more to the point. She was afraid that when he wrote, ‘There’s nothing true but heaven,’ he did not really know anything about the happy place or state he extolled—for heaven must begin on earth always; and the soul that would dwell with God in the world beyond the grave must dwell with Him here. That is what mamma said, you know.”

“It sounds right enough. A low, vulgar person would not enjoy himself if suddenly placed in a palace and expected to comport himself as a highly-bred person, and to relinquish all the low pleasures to which he had been accustomed. But how *can* one begin to live in heaven while he is yet in this world?”

“By living for God, I think.”

“Why not go into a convent at once? Monks and nuns do nothing else but serve God.”

“I am not sure of that; it seems to me idle, cowardly work to go out of the fight lest we be wounded. Mamma was telling us the other day the difference between innocence and virtue, and she showed us how poor a thing untested goodness—so-called—really is. And a great deal of convent-goodness must be of that sort, I imagine. Here comes papa; let us ask him what he thinks.”

“Pray do not. I have spoken to you, Irene; but I would not for worlds say anything to him.”

“You need not, unless you like; but you don’t know papa; nobody is ever afraid of him; everybody trusts him and speaks openly to him. Half the people in Endlestone take their troubles to him, and I never heard that any one regretted confidence reposed in him. Ever since I was a little child I have gone to him in every difficulty, and I have always been helped. Papa, Hilda and I are debating whether a convent-life is pleasing to God, or the reverse. What do you say?”

“That God has often been served and glorified within

convent-walls in the days gone by, when there seemed but the one choice for those fervent, ardent spirits who could not be men of blood and of violence. There was a time when many a man had to decide between the monastery and a life of riotous pleasure and brutal rapine, when women were only too happy to escape dangers and persecutions of which you cannot conceive, in the safe retreat of the cloister. There was little to do in those days, and it was chiefly in the convent's seclusion that purity and self-denial, charity and devotion flourished. I often wonder there were not more St. Francises and more St. Claras six hundred years ago. Remember, children, that was an era of darkness and clouds, and the light that now shines upon us from the sacred page was like a candle set in a dark lantern; it illuminated the paths of very few, and those few were too often deceived by the lurid glow cast from the lantern's specious and falsifying reflector. But as the age progressed, God's saints outgrew the necessity for special religious houses apart from the world, in which they were set to suffer, to toil, and to endure, just as children outgrew the garments of their childhood. Nothing is so progressive as truth; nothing is so capable of development as true religion. What our pious fathers did not know, God has given us to know; and generations to come will know assuredly that which we shall never fathom, at which we cannot even dimly guess. God's truth is eternal and infinite, and men learn it slowly, bit by bit, as the centuries speed on; so explorers learn a vast continent, the extent of which they do not know. I have heard of men discovering a continent and believing that they had found a mere island which they could quickly traverse and circumnavigate. I am afraid too many of us make the same mistake about the eternal truth itself."

"Then, papa, you would say that convent-life, which might have been good and holy once, is no longer so?"

"Not quite, my love. God forbid that I should condemn those who are following all the light they have. I believe convent-life, as it now is, from first to last, to be a grand mistake; in too many cases, I am afraid, it is something infinitely worse. I do not see how there can be—as

the world is constituted now—a healthy, moral convent atmosphere. Putting aside the question of hidden vice, such a life must entail no end of petty strifes and jealousies and miserable intrigues. Also, men and women have no right to shirk the responsibility that God gives them. The Master said, ‘Let your light shine before men !’ Still, there *may* be those who feel themselves nearest God in seclusion. Let us not condemn any who may seek, however mistakenly, in sincerity to serve the Lord ; only let us be careful to live up to all the light we have, and continually to seek more and more light. He who is contented with the light he has, and tries to shut out any further beams, is pretty sure, ere long, to find himself in a haze, mistaking meteors for the sun. Light and love—love and light ; that is really all we have to ask for ; for light and love include pardon and peace, and where love is, the demon selfishness, which is the root of all evil, must wither and fade away.”

“Pardon and peace !” Those words rang in Hilda’s ears for many a day ; she was never to forget them, though she was not yet fully to realise their blessed meaning.

“What made you talk about convent-life ?” asked Mr. Arnison presently.

“Hilda wondered whether that would be the best way of living to God, or living *for* God, which, in the end, comes to the same thing.”

“And again I say it is a slothful, craven, self-seeking mode of life, in which God cannot be honoured as He might be, and *is*, in the world among men, in the common and regular exercise of daily duty. One need not shut oneself up to pray ; a life of prayer *alone* must needs be a crippled spiritual life—that is, where work is possible. God means us to strive and to do, as well as to worship, though you know, my dear, ‘true service is true worship,’ just as much as ‘well-waited is well done.’ Hilda, you must know those familiar verses—

“‘We need not bid, for cloister’d cell,
Our neighbour and our work farewell,
Nor strive to wind ourselves too high,
For sinful man beneath the sky.

" ' The trivial round, the common task,
Would furnish all we ought to ask—
Room to deny ourselves; a road
To bring us daily nearer God.' "

" I never heard them. I do not know much, if anything, of sacred poetry. Where are they to be found ? "

" In Keble's 'Christian Year'—a book of true poetry, and of much beautiful spiritual thought, though one cannot always go with the poet in all his theology. The lines I quoted are in the 'Morning Hymn.' "

" Is the book at the Grey House ? "

" Certainly. But I think I have a spare copy, to which you are very welcome."

" Oh, thank you ! I shall like to read the whole. And do tell me, uncle, is there not a verse in the Bible about cedars ? "

" You mean the sixteenth verse of the 104th Psalm— 'The trees of the Lord are full of sap ; the cedars of Lebanon which He hath planted.' I often say that to myself as I look out at my great cedar, in the early summer, when it is putting forth its fresh green shoots. Now, children, it is growing too cool to sit out of doors, and tea will soon be ready ; we have it early on Sunday afternoons."

CHAPTER XI.

" O great Eternity ! Our little life is but a gust,
That bends the branches of thy tree,
And trails its blossoms in the dust."

NOVEMBER 21ST.—When we parted, Mary, I half promised that I would keep my diary for your benefit; but somehow I could not, on my first arrival here, either force or persuade myself to chronicle events as they transpired

from day to day. Also, I am not quite certain that I can write freely and out of my very heart, if these pages are intended for another person's eye, even though that other person be yourself, dear Mary—the one true friend who did not forsake me on my reverse of fortune. So I am not sure that you will ever see what I write in this little book; nevertheless, I think I shall *make believe* that it is for you—as, perhaps, after all, it may be in days to come, when both past and present have lost some of their bitter significance, when I can more impartially review my own conduct, as well as the conduct of those about me.

Life at the Grey House is so utterly unlike life at Kensington Gore, that I can hardly, sometimes, assure myself that I am the veritable Hilda Capel of other days. There seems so little in common between Aunt Dorothy's niece Hilda, and the gay, thoughtless girl, who fluttered like a butterfly through the brief delights of a London season, caring only for the pleasure of the hour, never reflecting soberly, fearing nothing, and hoping everything, and trusting everybody, simply because it did not occur to her that treachery and unfaith were among the possibilities of her lot. Aunt Dorothy has been so very considerate as to refrain from questioning me on anything that happened before I came to her; I fancy she knows something about Horace—ah! what a thrill of pain it gives me to write that name!—she must know something, for Mr. Seeley knew of my brief and scarcely-formed engagement, and he would be sure to refer to it in conversation with Aunt Dorothy, though I do not suppose he would mention any names. Aunt Dorothy is very kind; she is “as good as gold,” all the people here say, and of her absolute *truth* and sincerity I cannot doubt. Still I do not love her, and I am afraid I never shall; there is a coldness and dryness in her manner that invariably repel me whenever I feel any little *épanchement-de cœur* or even speak with a moderate enthusiasm. I do not think we shall ever quarrel; but I fear—I am almost quite sure—that we shall always remain mutually indifferent, doing our duty by each other, perhaps—she will do hers, I know—and nothing more.

And yet Aunt Dorothy's duty, as regards myself, is self-imposed; I have no real claim upon her. She is only

my grand-aunt, and she always declined intercourse with my parents ; something happened once, I have just found out—I don't know what—but something that extremely displeased my aunt, something that completely estranged her from my unhappy, misguided father. I think she knew him as he really was ; towards her he did not, or so it seems to me, assume the mask which he wore before the world at large. I fancy, too, she has at some period or other sustained injury at his hands, which makes it all the more generous of her that she gives his child a home and treats her kindly. Yes ! certainly *kindly*, though not affectionately. We may be kind to those for whom we entertain no affection ; kindness is one thing and love is another. We cannot be unkind to those we really love without absolutely hurting ourselves.

One day here is very much like another day, and yet the time does not go so slowly as I feared it would. The very regularity of our daily routine seems to speed us on our way. Every morning rising at the prescribed time—Aunt Dorothy herself is up before the sun, now that that luminary makes so tardy an appearance—then prayers, then breakfast, then out-door exercise if the weather permits, or domestic occupation of one kind or another within doors, if it happens to be wet. Then study till one o'clock, for Aunt Dorothy insists on my education being resumed ; she says I know nothing properly, that all I have learned is superficial and unsound, that even my accomplishments are all for outside show, a mere veneer, well-polished, but of little or no intrinsic value ! Complimentary, is it not, after being flattered into the persuasion that I was one of the best pianistes, and one of the finest singers, in London drawing-room society—that I might have been a *prima donna* had I chosen ?

"Niece Hilda," said Aunt Dorothy to me, when I had, at her express desire, given her a specimen of my musical attainments, "you have a certain power of execution ; you fly about the keys in admirable time and with wonderful precision ; you have evidently been taught how to overcome digital difficulties, but that you do not *understand* your own performance is obvious." And then she asked me a few questions which I could not answer ; they might

as well have referred to the *differential calculus*—whatever that may be! Whereupon she continued, “It is as I thought—you have learned only the mechanical part of music; you are utterly ignorant of the science; you shall learn counterpoint, thorough bass; you shall understand the theory of music.” And then followed a long dissertation, of which I comprehended about every twentieth word. It seemed to me that I was listening to a lecture on the actual difference between *tweedle-dum* and *tweedle-dee*! And so I am put back into scales, which I have to write myself, and all my “Operatic Gems” and brilliant *Fantasias* are stowed away in a drawer. I dare not so much as play a *valse*, nor am I sure that I wish to play one; *valses* belong too much to that brief, bright era, the memory of which I cherish, and yet would fain forget. That sounds strangely, does it not? And yet it is quite possible to shiver at the pain of a wound, and at the same time deprecate its being wholly healed. “That’s pure nonsense!” you will say, Mary; and that it has a twang of nonsense, I acknowledge; but, for all that, there is in it a certain and inexplicable truth. I would not for worlds quite forget, and yet I care not to remember.

I have been thinking this morning of that line of Tennyson’s—

“No—she never loved me truly; love is love for evermore.”

Am I then bound to love *him*—I don’t mean Tennyson, of course—for evermore? Or can I not discover that I never loved truly, that what I imagined was a woman’s deep love was only a girl’s soft fancy? I could never have been a jilt, like *Amy* of “Locksley Hall;” I could never have been

“Puppet to a father’s threat, and servile to a shrewish tongue.”

But it is just possible that I *did* make a mistake. I might have found out some day that what I thought was true love was nothing more than girlish liking. I have made so many discoveries since last July, so much that I believed was substantial and abiding has melted into thin air, so many glittering bubbles have collapsed as I tried to catch them, so much, too, that I once ignored has

thrust itself importunately forward, that I distrust myself and all my experiences. Ere very long I think my life will be more of a blank than a regret.

Well! but I was talking about my education, which has to begin all over again. It seems Aunt Dorothy has discovered that I am a bad arithmetician. She sent me into Endlestone one day with a list of small commissions, and a sovereign in my purse, and when I came home I could not in any way account for more than sixteen out of the twenty shillings I had somehow dissipated. When she found out that I "boggled," as she called it, over my pence table, that I mixed up francs and shillings, that I affirmed twelve times nine to be eighty-four, and that I blundered over a simple addition sum, she seemed quite shocked at my ignorance, and at once put me under a course of slate-and-pencil treatment preparatory to my undertaking the household accounts. Afterwards I am to learn the *higher branches* of arithmetic, and Irene is to be my instructor. She will teach me algebra, and take me through certain books of Euclid. I pity Irene; she does not know what a blockhead her promised pupil is. Also, I have to read history daily with Mrs. Dorothy, as well as some standard work of literature; we are reading *Macaulay* now, alternately with Madame de Staël's "*L'Allemagne*." I am astonished to find how much my grand-aunt knows, and how well she speaks several languages. As for her music, it is wonderful; she knows all about *fugues*, and that mysterious *counterpoint*, and it is as good as any concert to hear her play the *Songs without Words*, which I never could make anything of. But most she loves sacred music, and she will sit at her organ for an hour together singing hymns and chants, and solos from Handel's Oratorios.

The Arnison girls, too, sing splendidly—better than any amateurs I ever heard. Alice's "He shall feed His flock," and Flossie's "I know that my Redeemer liveth," are lovely beyond conception; but best of all is Irene's "O rest in the Lord;" her sweet, calm face, and her sweet, full, mellow voice so perfectly accord. These girls, whom I was prepared to associate with under a sort of protest, to admit to friendship on sufferance, as it were,

are thorough ladies, and far better educated than myself; yet they are only a tradesman's daughters. And curious to say, the tradesman himself is a man of culture and refinement, as well as a man of science. I had no notion that a *dyer* could be a gentleman! And, properly speaking, of course, he is not, though I must say I have known many gentlemen by birth far less gentlemanly than he.

Alice, my eldest cousin, is a very sweet and gentle girl, the *beau ideal* of what the eldest sister in a large family ought to be—friend and *confidante* of all the others. She is betrothed to a young man who lives near York, and they are to be married next spring, or, at latest, in the early summer. Already, the cry is, “What shall we do without our eldest?” Aunt Rose will lose her right hand, that is certain. Flossie is—the *beauty*, and very clever into the bargain; but I do not care for her as much as I do for Alice, nor do I myself think she really surpasses Alice in good looks. Flossie has a brilliant complexion, faultless features, rich, dark auburn hair, and fine dark eyes; she is very tall—*too* tall, in my opinion. A woman must be a daughter of the gods before she can be “divinely tall.” To my taste there is nothing like the *juste milieu*. Also, I have heard Flossie say sharp things once or twice, and the little ones do not rush to her as they do to Alice and Irene, and even to the twins, Lily and Rosie, who are wrapped up in each other, and scarcely ever seen apart. Even Cynthia, who is only fourteen, is more of the “little mother” than the queen-like, radiant Florence.

Ah, but Irene is the darling of them all! at least, to my mind. Alice is lovely, and Flossie is downright beautiful, and Irene is not quite either—and yet there is something in her gentle, colourless face that positively haunts me. When I say she is gentle, I don't mean that she is insipid; she has plenty of expression, and any one who looks at her carefully can perceive that she has no common share of good sense, and plenty of strength of mind; “quite as much as is good for a woman,” as I heard Louis Michaud say the other day. Louis Michaud is the one person at Indigo House whom I do not like.

Frenchman as he is, he is *a bear*. What would Cynthia and Octa say?

But to return to Irene, she is the happiest person I ever met with—not heedlessly, carelessly happy, as I was before the storm burst, but intelligently, thankfully happy. Her name and herself accord wonderfully; she is emphatically a *child of peace*. An evening or two ago Aunt Dorothy read out a verse at “prayers,” which made me think of my cousin Irene. The verse was this—“Great peace have they who love Thy law, and nothing shall offend them.” I have spoken more freely to Irene than to the others; we are very nearly of an age, and she and I took to each other from the first. We have paired naturally, she says; Alice and Flossie always seemed to belong exclusively to each other, and Rosie and Lily, being twins, are quite as naturally associated. Cynthia and the others are children, and have what they call “pactions” of their own in the schoolroom and nursery; though Cynthia, who is tall and well-grown for her age, considers herself to belong more to the “elders” than to the “children.” Cynthia very much resembles Florence, and will, I think, be quite as handsome and quite as clever; at present she is by turns a hoinen and a Miss Prim. She is Theodore’s chosen companion when he comes home for the holidays. The twins, I must mention, are going to Paris after Christmas; it is not quite decided whether they shall stay with Madame Michaud and attend classes, or go regularly to school as weekly boarders, spending their Sundays only with Madame. Up to the present time they have had no teachers besides their mother and elder sisters.

They are all so busy at the Blue House; they have very few idle moments, and yet they seem continually cheerful and full of fun. If in the old time I had heard their mode of life described, I should have thought it little better than the treadmill—a refined and softened species of penal servitude. Indeed, I came here myself quite in the spirit of an exile; as soon as I knew that the Grey House was my destination, I felt as if I had received sentence of transportation. And now, quite lately I mean, it has been dawning upon me that I am getting a little

reconciled to my lot. I am not sure that I would go back to the old life if I could, even supposing that things were other than they are. But as they are—and nothing can ever alter what has been—my poor father's daughter is better here among the hills and streams than in the brilliant circles where she would be now neglected and despised. I must bear his shame through life, and I can better bear it here, where no one turns on me the cold shoulder simply because I am his daughter, and where only two or three people know that terrible history. My cousins, I believe, have only been told that my father died suddenly and mysteriously, and that I was left penniless after being brought up as a great heiress. From something Irene let fall the other day, I feel sure it is so; she has no idea of poor papa's actual fate and horrible dishonour, and the other day, when something was being said about the *cholera*, I overheard Rosie check Lily, who was chattering very fast, and say to her—"Hush! Poor Hilda's father died of cholera, you know." Of course, I took no notice, but I was glad that they believed it. Since the day after my arrival here, Aunt Dorothy has never once referred to my parents, or to my Aunt Mowbray, nor have the Arnisons mentioned papa at all. Only one day, when I was very dull and dispirited, Uncle Arnison came and caressed me, as if I had been one of his own girls, and said—oh! with such a kind look in his dear, truthful grey eyes—"You must think of me always as your father, Hilda; don't be down-hearted, you will be taken care of."

Is it not strange that I have heard only once from Aunt Mowbray? It was shortly after we parted; she wrote from Geneva, but she was going on to the Engadine, and she gave me no address. I could not, therefore, answer her letter. Perhaps she wishes us to be finally and entirely separated. How strange it is! And to think that less than six months ago we were as mother and daughter, that our future seemed inextricably blended, that even my anticipated marriage was not actually to part us! My marriage! That is all over; I shall never marry now. I shall be an old maid like Aunt Dorothy; I think, when I begin to get elderly, I shall always wear

black, as she does, and I shall call myself "Mrs. Hilda Capel," as a sign that I have accepted perpetual spinsterhood. I wonder why Aunt Dorothy never married? If she was like that picture in the red room, she must have been a beauty in her time; and she had money of her own—she was no sham heiress. Alas! how bitterly I wrote that! Shall I ever, in the days to come, when I am a grave, middle-aged woman, forgive the cruel wrongs of my youth? for my life, up till now, has been one great continuous wrong. Now, for the first time, I know exactly who and what I am. I have an assured position, humble and dependent though it be.

November 23.—Yesterday, I went to the Blue House, and received permission to stay all night—if I chose. Of course I chose. To go to the Blue House from the Grey House is something like going from the cloister into the world, I should think—though a very little while ago I should have laughed at the idea of Endlestone being the "world" at all, except in a purely geographical point of view. It was Cynthia's birthday, and mild festivities were in progress. I went to an early dinner—everybody here seems to dine early—and we had the orthodox birthday pudding, of course, and jugged hare, which, it appears, is Cynthia's favourite dainty. It is a custom with the Arnisons to permit the children to choose their dinner on their respective birthdays. Jacky was asked last month, when he attained the mature age of three, what he would have for his birthday dinner, and he replied, without a moment's hesitation, "Zinzer-bread and massed turnips!" Jacky is the drollest little fellow imaginable, and a great pet with all the sisters; he is petted, but not spoiled. I am beginning to find out that petting and spoiling are not—as they so frequently are assumed to be—synonymous.

The children were all eager to know when my birthday was, that it might be kept in turn with the others; when I said it was in May, they clapped their hands, because, as they said, they had not a birthday among them in May, and they had always wanted to have a May-queen of their own, and now they could crown me next year, when May came round again.

We spent a very pleasant evening—the early part of it

—with the little ones in the laundry, which was all swept and garnished for games and dances, the twins and Cynthia being also very busy at the stove, intent on divers kinds of apple cookery. Lily was in ecstasies when she had achieved a prodigious dish of something white and tasty, called “apple-snow;” and Rosie distinguished herself by the production of *apple caramels*, which nobody seemed ever to have heard of before. Aunt Rose advised her to send her recipe to Mrs. Beeton. The twins are intensely practical and housewifely; they study cookery as if it were a fine art, and they consoled themselves, when they found that a year’s residence in Paris awaited them, with “Well! we shall at least learn how to produce all the best French dishes!”

“I shall undertake soups and ragouts,” quoth Lilian.

“And I *sweets* of all sorts!” quoth Rosamond.

“Alice learnt lots of things when she was with the Michauds: Flossie learnt millinery and how to *coiffer* herself to distraction; *we will learn cookery.*”

“And Flossie learned *firtation* also!” cried Cynthia, mischievously; “when my turn comes I shall follow her example. The English, Louis says, have no more idea of firtation than a plough-horse has of racing.”

“Louis! Louis said that!” There was a general chorus of exclamations.

“You must have mistaken Louis,” said Alice, gravely, “for French girls have no opportunity of flirting. They have not the liberty of English girls; when Flossie and I were in Paris, we could not have flirted if we had tried, for we were never allowed to be alone with gentlemen, not even with Louis. French ladies only go into society when they are married.”

“I do not believe Louis ever said anything of the sort,” remarked Florence, loftily; “and if it were not Cynthia’s birthday she ought to receive a severe reprimand for talking so improperly. What do you say, Hilda? You have been in Paris.”

“I was at school there for a whole twelvemonth,” I replied, “and, as far as I remember, I never even spoke to any gentleman—who was not a master, that is—all the time.”

Cynthia was going to make a pert reply, but Alice stopped her. "Don't, dear," she said, softly, "the verb to flirt is one of the ugliest in the English language; don't let any of us attempt to conjugate it. Please say no more, Cynthia."

"Very well, I won't, then," said Cynthia, stoutly. "I always do what *you* wish, Alice."

Such a sweet, pure influence Alice has over her younger sisters; I cannot help thinking things will scarcely go so smoothly when Flossie becomes Miss Arnison. I ought to notice here that Irene has only paid a flying visit to the Michauds; till lately she has been so delicate that aunt and uncle would not trust her away from home.

A little while after this conversation, Alice and I, crossing from the laundry, which stands a little apart from the house and contiguous to the works, noticed the beauty of the night, and the peculiar effect which the westerling moon had upon the buttresses of the church tower. "Come with me across the dye-yard," said Alice, "and I will show you a picture worth looking at. The lights and shades on the lower part of the town and on the river are wonderful; I have gone out many a night to have a glance at them."

"But may we?" I urged.

"Oh, yes! we need not go ten yards beyond our own grounds, and we shall not meet anybody. If we did, it would not matter, we are so well known here. Remember, we are neither in London nor in Paris; we do as we like at Endlestone, blissfully careless of Mrs. Grundy."

Alice was as good as her word; she took me just beyond the boundaries of the works to one end of the Wynd, which, just there, is open to the broad meadow-lands, sloping to the river, and from whence is the best view of the beautiful old church and its tall, buttressed tower, which must be a landmark for all the country round. There, in the calm, lustrous moonbeams stood the grand, minster-like church, the pale light turning the grey stone to silver, while the shadows were proportionately black, recalling, of course,

“Buttress and buttress alternately
Seemed framed of ebon and ivory.”

Alice and I both thought of it, for the words came simultaneously to our lips. Beyond the church and the cloisters lay the quiet graveyard, and beyond that the peaceful river, winding like crystal between the hills, which rose up in solemn grandeur under that deep blue night-sky, burning with all its stars, save where the moon-beams eclipsed their fainter radiance. All was still. We could hear the water flowing over the stepping-stones half a mile from the town, and also the deep murmur of the Force in the rocky Ghyll at Chinsey, full four miles distant. It was so beautiful; the silence seemed almost holy, and tears came to my eyes, I knew not why. I do not remember that I ever felt so before. Alice, too, was moved, familiar as the scene must be to her, and presently she said, “Is not that river, winding its way through hill and dale to the sea, like life flowing on day by day to eternity?” I think I shivered a little; that word eternity has such an awful sound. I said as much.

“And yet,” rejoined Alice, “we are in eternity now, if we come to think of it.”

“I do not understand.”

“Eternity is not all before us, it lies behind us as well; this little space called *time* is but a small portion of eternity. One gets confounded if one tries to think about it. We only know it is, has been, and ever will be.”

“Shall we ever know what eternity really means?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” answered Alice; “we shall certainly know all that is best for us to know. God will keep no good thing from us here or in the worlds to come. What wondrous blessings are in store for us, we cannot tell—it doth not yet appear.”

While we talked, we had strolled up the Wynd as far as Chapel Street, at the corner of which is the little Methodist meeting-house. Some kind of service was going on, for the congregation commenced to sing a hymn just as we reached the door. We stood and listened just within the outer threshold. They sang—oh! how they sang—as if they meant every word—

" For ever with the Lord,
 Amen ! so let it be ;
 Life from the dead is in that word,
 'Tis immortality.

" Here in the body pent,
 Absent from Him I roam,
 Yet nightly pitch my moving tent
 A day's march nearer home."

" A day's march nearer home—*nearer home*—NEARER HOME ! " Clearer and louder rang out the triumphant notes, and with every verse came the same glad refrain, "*Nearer home ! Nearer home !*" Then there was a prayer. I remember only the concluding petition—"Lord, grant us all pardon and peace, even the peace which passeth understanding, for Thy dear Son's sake. Amen."

" Pardon and peace ! " That was what uncle spoke of that first Sunday when I walked with him and Irene in the garden. *Nearer home !* What must it be to feel always that through life and through death, through weal and through woe, one is ever *going home* ? Alice and Irene feel it, I am sure. Will it never be my experience ? Oh, Lord ! teach me.

CHAPTER XII.

" Ah, bitter chill it was :
 The owl for all his feathers was a-cold,
 The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
 And silent was the flock in woolly fold."

A LITTLE later, and the mild weather was all over. A bitter frost set in, the wind blew keenly from the north-east, and one morning Hilda looked out from her chamber

window on a wide world of dazzling whiteness. It was the first time she had ever seen snow in the country, and the first time she had ever felt the cold in all its severity. Accustomed to bedroom fires and warmer latitudes and unlimited supplies of hot water, she shivered as she broke the ice in her narrow-necked ewer, and felt that the towel on which she had dried her hands the night before was quite as stiff as leather. She made her toilet as speedily as possible, but her fingers were so numbed that she found it impossible properly to arrange her hair, and had to dispose of it in a loose coil in the best fashion she could. Then her dress, as she put it on, felt thinner than desirable ; she had found it scarcely warm enough on several chilly days in October, now it was decidedly unseasonable and uncomfortable. And yet she had nothing more suitable in her wardrobe, except, indeed, the grey winsey, which was not mourning, and the violet merino, neither of which had been subjected to the dyeing process which Patty had suggested. By the time Hilda was ready to go down she felt miserable both in mind and body.

"What was I doing this day last year?" she pondered, as she slowly tidied up her room according to custom ; she had found out that she was expected to be her own maid in every particular ; that nothing that was left about was even put away by the servants !—a new and strange experience to the girl who had been waited on hand and foot all her life, even at school being indulged with personal attendance.

"What was I doing ? Where was I ?" she continued reflectively. "Ah, I recollect ; we spent this week, last year, at the Agnews', at their place in Sussex. It was not nearly so cold as it is now ; but we had fires to dress by, and Patty brought a cup of tea to my bedside before I thought of rising. And downstairs all was so snug and bright, the passages warmed, the rooms at a delicious temperature, a gay party at the breakfast-table, and myself a favoured, if not a petted, guest ! Oh ! happy time ! most luckless, miserable Hilda ! No ! I shall never, never get used to these Arctic regions—to this semi-barbarous mode of life ! "

I am obliged to confess that Hilda went downstairs

in a discontented frame of mind. She found her aunt in one of her brightest moods; the old lady seemed positively to revel in the intense cold ; she had been into her dairy, and had visited her poultry-yard, and prescribed for an invalided cow, and was now rubbing her hands and declaring that the morning was "splendid!"

"I think it is perfectly wretched," said Hilda, in a tone of deep disgust, as she cowered over the blaze. "I hate cold weather."

"It is very foolish of thee to hate any kind of weather," returned Mrs. Dorothy ; "nor do I think thou art right in expressing thyself so strongly on such a subject. All kinds of weather are due in their season, and all are enjoyable if thou makest the best of them."

"Nothing could ever make me enjoy myself when I am freezing ! I had to break the ice before I could wash this morning." And Hilda spoke in an injured tone.

"Of course thou hadst !" returned Mrs. Dorothy. "I had to do it myself ; but I enjoyed the brace it gave me ; and when I had been across to the fowls, and the pigs, and the cowhouse, and seen to the weighing of the butter, I was quite in a glow. Thou shouldst bestir thyself, Hilda ; there is nothing like exercise for making one warm in wintry weather. Why ! thou lookest as if thy very blood were congealed ! Thou art all blue and white, except thy nose, and that is red. Thou hadst better walk two or three miles along the Appleby Road, and back again, as fast as thou canst tramp !"

"Walk in this snow ! Why, it is up to the knees !"

"Nay, thou romancest ! It is nowhere deeper than two inches, and it has not drifted. If we stayed indoors for two inches of snow, we North Country-folk might be shut up half the winter. Two years ago a deep snow fell on Christmas Eve, and we never saw the grass again till Pancake Day, which occurred in the first week of February. And all the time it froze—oh, how it did freeze ! I lost my best standard roses, and one of my finest Portugal laurels was killed down to the ground. But it was a merry time ; we had skating, and snow-ballings, and sliding—that is, the young folks had ; and better things than these, for we had to make soup three times a week for

the poor people, and to rummage out all the warm clothing and covering we could spare for those who needed it."

But all this sounded to Hilda barbarous in the extreme, and she only shivered the more at the prospect of a six weeks or two months' frost. In truth, the poor girl, reared in habits of soft luxury, and totally unused to any kind of privation or self-denial, felt the cold most painfully, and all the more, that she was improperly clad for the season. Her dress being black, and falling in ample folds, did not convey the idea of thinness and consequent unsuitability that a lighter material might have done. Any pale tint would have seemed out of keeping with the wintry aspect of the outer world; black looked so entirely in the fitness of things as to escape particular observation. It did not strike Aunt Dorothy that her niece was as much in want of warm garments as any poor old woman in the neighbourhood.

"Let me see," continued the good lady, "what shall I set thee to do? Suppose, by way of beginning, thou shouldst run up and down stairs half-a-dozen times as fast as thou canst go?"

"I am more than ten years old," replied Hilda, in a voice as freezing as the atmosphere. And Mrs. Dorothy comprehended that the young lady was offended, though she failed to comprehend the extreme wretchedness of her feelings.

"Very well," responded the aunt, quietly; "then I suppose thou must be cold, if fire will not warm thee, and I never knew any one get really warm by hanging over the hearth. There is the prayer-bell; I think thou hadst better play the tune this morning; it will be at least something in the way of exertion."

Hilda complied, of course, but she nearly broke down in the second verse of the hymn. Her fingers were so benumbed that she could scarcely feel the keys; and her eyes so full of tears that she could not distinguish the notes. The words they were singing seemed to her at that moment full of mockery:—

"Oh! timely happy, timely wise,
Hearts that with rising morn arise,
Eyes that the beam celestial view,
Which evermore makes all things new."

What "new mercies" had she to give thanks for, with the returning day that had risen on her so chilly and drearily? What "new treasures still, of countless price" were hers, either for comfort or for sacrifice? When they knelt down she could bury her face in her hands, and let the great tears stream down her pallid cheeks. The hot coffee that came in as soon as prayers were over did a little to brace her up, and make her blood flow rather more healthily in her veins. She would have eaten nothing had not Mrs. Dorothy, seeing her crumpling a morsel of dry toast, put a pork-chop on her plate; there had been pig-killing several days before, one of Jessy White's elder children having fallen a victim to the exigencies of the season; and Hilda, though filled with secret horror at the idea of eating a creature she had seen alive, and accustomed to regard *pork au naturel* as the food of plebeians, could not help acknowledging that the meat was very delicate and appetising.

"Of course," said Aunt Dorothy, her good-humour at once restored, "country-fed pork, especially such pork as mine, and common butchers' pork, are no more to be compared than higgler's and farm-yard poultry! And that reminds me, they are very busy in the kitchen; there is still some lard to be 'rendered down,' and the sausage meat is not yet ready. We will go and help them; thou wilt surely get warm over the *lard-kettle*!"

Hilda told herself that she was supremely indifferent to her fate; but the incongruity between melting down lard in a kitchen and playing billiards with young ladies and gentlemen of high degree in a country house, where they dined at half-past seven, and danced, or acted charades afterwards, till midnight, struck her most painfully. And how the fire would scorch her face, and how the handling of spoons and pans would soil her fingers! She would be warm enough, no doubt, and much too warm! Could there be no possible compromise between freezing and roasting?

But half-an-hour afterwards she was in the great kitchen, with an immense apron, or pinafore rather, tied all round her, with a kettle of lard on a clear fire before her, and an implement called a basting-spoon in

her right hand. In a very few minutes she was no longer cold, in a quarter-of-an-hour she was unduly warm, in half-an-hour she longed for the termination of her task.

Mrs. Dorothy was superintending the sausage-meat at one table; the cook, at another, was intent on raised pork pies. An under-maid was busy manufacturing "bony pies" for the kitchen supper.

Meanwhile the sun had broken through the clouds, and was shining on the snow. Hilda wished she had taken the three miles' walk on the lonely Appleby Road; the fells must look glorious, and the air, though freezing, would be preferable to the pork-scented atmosphere of the kitchen. And though she had no warm dress, she had brought with her her last winter's sealskin jacket and muff, and only a week ago she had invested a few of the precious shillings that yet remained to her in what Alice called a pair of "seven-leagued boots," which she was assured were absolutely necessary for winter wear in those northern latitudes.

The weary morning passed slowly, the lard was all finished at last, and put away in shallow pans to cool, the sausage-meat was ready for the skins, and then Mrs. Dorothy volunteered to teach Hilda how "to raise a crust!" By this time Hilda, though miserable, was no longer out of temper; she had too sweet and sound a nature to nourish more than passing enmity towards people or circumstances; but she was wofully tired, and not a little sick and dispirited. How she wished that Jessie White's fat progeny was still grunting in the sty! She did not prove an apt scholar, and her first crust was an utter failure, and had to be manipulated over again by more experienced hands. Indeed, it is not every woman who succeeds after long practice in making good "short," really eatable raised pie-crust! Mrs. Dorothy was a queen among pie-makers, and she mingled the flour and lard, nicely melted in warm milk, with an *aplomb* and grace peculiarly her own. Hilda's fingers seemed all thumbs on that memorable morning, and her arms ached from the wrists to the elbows, if not to the very shoulders. She was so tired at last that she looked wearily at the broad, cushioned settle by the great fireplace, and wished

she could lie down there and go to sleep. She was not pale now, for the fire had painted her cheeks, and made her as rosy as a milkmaid.

Aunt Dorothy had no idea that she was cruel to Hilda ; she thought she was doing her a real kindness in rousing her from a self-indulgent lethargy, and teaching her the comfort and pleasure of profitable labour. She had been up and afoot since six o'clock, and now felt as brisk as ever, for the keen cold braced all her energies and invigorated her spirits. It was warm, sultry weather that distressed Mrs. Dorothy. She did not know how the low temperature affected Hilda, and having herself always been used to an active life, she could not guess how little fitted her niece was for the domestic occupations which to herself were positive enjoyment. Least of all did she notice the unsuitability of the girl's dress—that neat black, unlined cashmere, which was now pinned carefully back, the sleeves rolled up, and a cooking apron over all. She did, however, say—"Hilda ! that petticoat is far too thin for this weather ; no wonder thou art cold. Put on a winsey, or a quilted stuff skirt, when thou dost get ready for dinner."

And so many servants—above all the unfriendly Barker—being present, Hilda did not reply that she had in her wardrobe neither winsey nor quilted petticoat. A minute or two afterwards there was a movement in the hall, and Irene entered fresh and sparkling from her walk. Hilda was glad to see her, but she was too tired and dispirited to care much about anything or anybody ; yet any kind of diversion was a relief just then.

"What, pork-pie making ! We had one batch last week, and shall have another just before Christmas," was Irene's first observation, after the usual greetings ; "and so you are teaching Hilda, Aunt Dorothy ! Mamma says no one comes up to you in raised pies ; so I hope Hilda will profit by her advantages. Poor pigs and turkeys, if they did but know what the savoury Yule-tide brings them ! "

"We have well-nigh finished," said Mrs. Dorothy, "and I am afraid, from Hilda's looks, she has not greatly enjoyed her morning. I think, however, we have both

earned our dinner ; so, as thou hast arrived, we will now adjourn to the parlour, Irene, and of course thou wilt dine with us ; we have some famous soup to warm thee after thy long walk."

" I did not feel it so cold after the first quarter of a mile, only the wind blew piercingly from Stanton-moor. Do you know, Aunt Dorothy, the river is frozen over, and the ice on the pool bears well ? Yes ! I should like some dinner before I go home ; and, aunt, may I take Hilda back with me ? "

" I hardly know ; I will think about it," said Mrs. Dorothy, as she took off her apron and rolled down her sleeves. Hilda had already retreated to wash her hands, which were covered with flour, and also to look in the glass, for Nancy had whispered to her, as, almost surreptitiously, she pushed into her grasp a jug of hot water, " Your face is ever such a smudge, miss ; there's a streak of ' colly ' right across your nose ! " And Hilda felt wonderfully curious to inspect the effect, the substantive " colly " being entirely new to her.

Mrs. Dorothy composedly washed her hands at the sink in the scullery, and, bidding the cook not delay with the dinner, walked with Irene into the dining-room. " Why dost thou want Hilda to-day ? " she asked, as soon as her visitor had taken off her bonnet.

" We thought she would enjoy the skating. Papa has promised us some good fun to-night, for the pool is like glass and wonderfully firm. Besides, the water is so shallow that one would only get a ducking, if one did go through. May not Hilda come, aunt ? "

" Hilda seems to me in a very discontented frame of mind, Irene. She grumbled about the cold like a naughty peevish child when she came down this morning ; I know she would have hung over the fire with a book, or a scrap of work in her hand, till now, if I had not insisted on rousing her into action. I made her finish the lard that was left over from yesterday—with Nancy's assistance, that is."

" Poor Hilda ! were you not rather hard upon her, Aunt Dorothy ? I thought she looked very miserable when I spoke to her, and it was decidedly a case of ' red as a rose

is she,' though I don't know whether a peony would not be the better simile. I wondered how she had managed to burn her face so badly."

"Why say 'poor Hilda'? Do not you elder girls all help in the kitchen at busy times? have not you and your sisters 'rendered down' the lard of your own pigs many and many a time? Don't you all scorch your faces occasionally, and pride yourselves on being thoroughly domesticated? I ask nothing of Hilda that your mother does not ask of you."

"Ah! but that is so different. Look at Hilda's snowy little hands that never touched pot or kettle, or metal-spoon, or anything that could hurt or soil them! We have been used to helping in the house, and we have been taught to do all sorts of things of which Hilda has not the least conception."

"More's the pity! I am surprised at thee, Irene; does not thy good sense tell thee that Hilda must be taught that she cannot any longer be a fine lady? She never had any right to the position she occupied; she was no more an heiress than thou art; and to encourage her in living a life of indolence is no true kindness. It is time she began to feel her real footing. She has been a doll all her days; now she must be a reasonable woman."

"Of course she must; but, auntie, I am sure Hilda does not wish to be idle, and I do not think she is what you would call a 'doll.' She must feel the change very much; Alice and I were talking about it only yesterday. Of course, the world she lived in is a *terra incognita* to us, but we gather from little things she lets drop, and from what we read in books, that it was all ease and luxury and pleasure."

"The more reason why she should lose no time in adapting herself to a sphere in which she is expected to be useful as well as ornamental. Besides, she will be much happier when once she feels that she has duties of her own, and when she can cheerfully conform to her present mode of life."

"I am sure she will; but I think, if I were in her place, I should not easily be *forced* into contentment. Hilda has so much good sense, Aunt Dorothy, that she

cannot fail to feel the wisdom of what you would say—*in time*; but we must be gentle with her. Think how bitter her fall must have been! How crushing must have been the blow! And mamma told us—we three elder ones, only we are never to make the slightest reference to it—that there was a lover to be given up; that must have been worst of all to one of Hilda's temperament."

"Unluckily the lover gave her up! Mr. Seeley says he was a very worthless, gay young man, who sought the supposed heiress, caring nothing for the girl herself, whom he deserted immediately upon the discovery of his mistake."

"So much the worse for her! It was enough to kill her. Oh, aunt dear, we must be very tender with her; don't you think the Lord Himself would bid us deal most tenderly with her? She was not to blame for all that happened; she was sinned against from the first, rather than sinning; and when we think what her training has been, we must confess that only a very fine nature could have escaped from being utterly spoiled, from being warped from every good and unselfish inclination. She will come all right soon; I know she will! But we cannot expect her to throw off the habits and ideas of more than eighteen years in less than three months—can we now? All things considered, she has borne the uprooting well—at least papa says so."

"And thy father is a wise man, who never speaks thoughtlessly. Thou art his own child, Irene, and thou art truly as thy name imports—a *child of peace!* Thou art right; we must be gentle with this poor girl, and not add to the sufferings she has had to endure. Or, rather, I ought to say that I must be gentle with her; there is no need to preach to thee, nor to thy mother, nor to thy father, on the duty of gentleness. I am afraid I did lose my patience with her this morning; I was vexed at her childishness, because she was put out with the severe weather. I did not think at the time that what only makes us brisk and nimble may chill her to the heart; and that what we—I, at least—contemn as enervating indulgences, she may miss as common necessary comforts. I must say she did look perished with the cold when she came down to prayers."

"No wonder! It was bitterly cold this morning; we all of us rushed to the nursery fire to finish dressing. I hope you did not condemn Hilda to your own Spartan custom of splashing in ice-cold water?"

"She said she had to break the ice; she might have had hot water had she rung for it; there is always a plentiful supply in the kitchen. But truly I did not think of ordering it for her; cold water is so much healthier, and to my mind so much pleasanter. Why, I, an old woman, came down all in a glow; if I had messed about with hot water I should have been as chilly as a fire-spaniel. Thou must confess, Irene, that the young folks of to-day are sadly degenerate."

"I am not so sure of that, Aunt Dorothy. Mamma lets us have warm water whenever we like; indeed, she thinks it necessary for perfect cleanliness; and I cannot see the use of hardening ourselves to go through life with as little comfort as possible. What profit is there in mere asceticism? There are too many of us to indulge in luxuries, but both papa and mamma like us to have every comfort."

"Your parents and I do not quite agree in our views of training young people, and I have taken Hilda for my child, so I must be allowed to exercise my own judgment. Is it not good for a man—ay, and for a woman, too—to bear the yoke in youth? Is not discipline wholesome? Only, I do agree with thee, that one must not be too hard upon the undisciplined; one must make allowances for long-rooted habitudes. And here Hilda comes, and the dinner also."

Irene thought her cousin looked both sad and tired, and she perceived at once what Mrs. Dorothy had not—that she was wearing quite too thin a dress for so winterly a season. The soup had been sent away before anything was said about Hilda's visit to the Blue House, and then Mrs. Dorothy began: "Hilda, thy cousin Irene wishes thee to return with her to Indigo House; of course thou must stay the night. Thou canst go if thou wouldest like." Hilda's face brightened up a little, but she rather languidly accepted the permission, and asked Irene at what time they must set off.

"Very soon," was the answer, "for it will be dark by four o'clock, if those snow-clouds yonder come down upon us; and if the storm came on again, we should hardly find our way, well as we know it; we might easily get astray at the cross roads, where once even papa got upon the moor, in a great fog. I think I must hurry you, Hilda, if aunt does not object."

"Do you mind my leaving you alone, Aunt Dorothy?" asked Hilda, feeling suddenly that she might be selfish in going to enjoy herself while her benefactress was left solitary. But Mrs. Dorothy answered, "Mind being left alone, child? Why, I have been alone nearly all my life, if you can call it being alone, with Dash and Trot, and all the servants, and the organ, and my books and knitting. You may go with a clear conscience, Hilda; I shall not feel deserted, and I hope you will enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, aunt. At what time shall you expect me home to-morrow?"

"You had better come before dinner, the days are so short; and if you have finished, I should advise you to go and dress at once; as Irene says, the evening will close in rapidly, and it is not well to be out in the open roads after dark, especially when there is snow in the air. Put your furs on, you will need them."

And very soon the girls were upon their way, Hilda feeling more cheerful as soon as her face was turned towards Endlestone. But not to-morrow, nor next day, nor for many days, not while the old year lasted, was she to see the Grey House again.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONFIDENCES.

"For truth has such a face and such a mien,
As to be lov'd needs only to be seen."

HILDA's spirits had risen considerably by the time she reached her uncle's house. As the girls stood on the brow of the hill which overlooked Endlestone itself, the level country beyond and the further fells and moorland, the old-fashioned little town with its white roofs, tall chimneys, and wreaths of curling smoke, made quite a pretty picture. A faint grey haze had settled on the meadows across the river, but the heights were tolerably clear, and quite covered with the newly-fallen snow. Hilda had seen glaciers and snow-crowned mountains in Switzerland; but then she was no abiding sojourner in those abodes of ice, and the summer-land, all green and flowery, lay below her feet. This was her first view of a real English wintry snow-world.

"Is it not lovely?" said Irene, stopping to gaze at the fair prospect fast fading from view in the deepening twilight. "What pure soft shades of grey; and that pearly whiteness, with here and there dark shadows thrown aslant its unbroken surface; and how beautiful the trees are—every branch and spray turned to frosted silver!"

"Yes, it is beautiful," said Hilda; "but it is the beauty of death; and oh! how cold!"

"It is nothing to what we shall have it, if the weather-prophets prove true. Hilda, you must wrap up; that sealskin is very nice, but your dress is only fit for autumn and medium temperatures. I know mamma will scold you when she sees it, and talk to you about the 'Clothes Philosophy.'"

Hilda said nothing; she only shivered. Irene wondered if she were offended. Of course, ladies are not expected to make critical remarks on the dress of their

companions; but, then, *they* were cousins, and had begun to be very intimate and free-spoken with each other. Irene almost wished she had not spoken. "I think we are going to have a fine evening, after all," she observed presently, by way of starting a fresh subject.

"Did you say we were going to *skate*?" asked Hilda.

"Yes; that is supposed to be the evening's entertainment, if only it will not begin to snow again. Papa says we shall not have much more downfall while the thermometer is so low. Of course you *skate*, Hilda?"

"Not very well. Last winter there was very little ice—none that would bear—while we were in the country, and before that I had not many opportunities. Where do you *skate*?"

"Sometimes on the great bend of the river, but to-night on our own pool—that broad, shallow sheet of water in the large meadow behind the dye-houses. The ice there is very thick, and the pool is only deep at one corner, where it slopes, and of course we keep away from it. It would be dangerous to fall in there; at any other part you would only get a cold plunge-bath."

"That would be nearly as bad as being drowned, such a night as this!"

"It would not be pleasant. But what do you think happened three winters ago, when some of us were skating and sliding on Morrowsby-mere, up among the moors? We had with us a youth of about twenty, a guest of Sir Paul Braden's—it was the Bradens' party, indeed—and in the middle of the lake was a place only just skimmed over, against which we were all duly cautioned. Well, just as it was getting dusk, and Lady Braden was calling us all together, like a hen clucking to her chickens, this young fellow—Philip Harwood was his name—began to cut figures of eight, and play all sorts of pranks, with one or two more gentlemen who did not immediately obey Lady Braden's summons. The light was failing fast—it was a January afternoon—and we were all anxious to set off home, as we had a good deal of moorland to traverse, and only certain objects by way of landmark. Suddenly Philip Harwood, who was being chased by Walter Braden, disappeared; in the

excitement of the chase he had skated right up and into the hole, which, as I said, was barely frozen over. Before there was time to exclaim even, Walter Braden, unable to check himself, had followed his friend into the water.

"Oh, dear, what an outcry there was! Poor Lady Braden was almost frantic. However, some one called out that the mere—or tarn, rather—was nowhere of any great depth, and both the young men could swim—which was, indeed, a fact; and in several minutes, with a little help from a walking-stick, which one gentleman had with him, they emerged, dripping like river gods, and trying to shake the water from their clothes. They were all right, they said, and they would have a good race home, take a warm bath, and be dressed before we ladies arrived at the Hall. Accordingly they set off at full speed, but soon relaxed their pace, which grew slower and slower, till it grew to be an awkward sort of jog-trot, and almost a hobble. About a mile or more from the mere we came up with them. It was no laughing matter to them, but they did look most absurd! The cold was intense; a cutting wind had risen in the north-east, and swept across the moor, freezing our very marrow—and *their clothes!* There they were, as they declared, in proof armour, long icicles hanging from their hair, which was frozen quite stiff, and unable to bend a joint without vigorous exertion.

"It grew to be quite alarming, for every moment their garments became more impenetrable, and their difficulty was increased. Walter Braden confessed afterwards that he had never in his life been in such miserable plight; he felt as though he were clothed in an iron shroud, and every step was taken in real pain. Happily he knew a short cut through the wood, and so lessened the distance; but it was late when they reached the Hall, and Sir Paul had begun to grow uneasy."

"And was anybody the worse?"

"Yes; Philip Harwood was very much the worse. Walter had a severe cold, and kept his bed for several days, and was under the doctor's care; but poor Philip awoke next morning in all the agonies of rheumatic fever. He did not leave the Hall till the May-bloom was on the hedges, and then he had to go to the German baths, and

was an invalid all the summer. We were all very sorry, for Philip Harwood is our great favourite."

"Who are these Bradens? I have heard them mentioned before."

"They are the Bradens of Bradenshope—a very old family in these parts. There has always been a Sir Paul Braden for I don't know how many centuries; but there will not be one to succeed the present baronet."

"Has he not sons?"

"Only one, the Walter of whom I was speaking. But at that time Walter was the second son, and he had an elder brother, Paul. He died more than a year ago, and the Bradens left Bradenshope, and have never returned. It is a sad story; I will tell it to you another time, for here we are at home."

"Were you intimate with the Bradens?"

"Very much so; mamma and Lady Braden were girlfriends and schoolfellows, and they correspond regularly. We all miss going to Bradenshope very much."

"Strange," thought Hilda, "that a dyer's family should be on intimate terms with county people. But I forgot; Aunt Rose was a Capel, after all. I should like to know more about these Bradens; I wonder when they will come back from the Continent, or wherever they may be! Irene did not say, but people generally do go abroad when there has been a death in the family. I should like to know about the poor young man who died."

Hilda was strangely interested in these Bradens whom she had never seen, and of whom she had scarcely heard till this afternoon. She remembered now that Mrs. Dorothy had more than once referred to the Bradens of Bradenshope, but it was only some passing allusion; nothing had hitherto been said to awake her curiosity about them. Whether it was the story of "the ducking" that impressed the whole affair on her memory, she could not tell; but most certainly, as she sat at tea, and afterwards at the pool, she was continually recalling the scene Irene had described; she even caught herself wishing the Bradens would find their way home to Bradenshope. "How ridiculous!" she said to herself. "I cannot get

these people out of my head ! Suppose they should ever come to be anything to me ! I *might*—I dare say I *should*—get to know them if they should return home, as I suppose they will some time or other. Dear me ! how silly to concern myself about strangers."

Hilda, however, seemed fated to keep these "strangers" well before her mind ; for after tea Octa asked her if she would like to look at her mamma's great album, which her cousin had never seen because it had been away at York ever so many weeks being rebound.

"It came back yesterday," said Octa ; "is it not a beauty ? It was papa's own present to mamma on her birthday six or seven years ago. And Jacky got hold of it, before he knew any better, and pulled the cover till it was loose. It is as good as new again now, and Olive and I put the photos and the rest of the things in this morning."

Hilda assented, and Octa spread the great russia-leather bound volume on an ottoman, and at once began to show and explain the portraits. Of course, there were Mr. and Mrs. Arnison side by side, and then their children, beginning with Alice, who had her betrothed as *vis-à-vis*, and ending with Jacky, who had scowled at the photographer, in spite of every blandishment, till he looked in his picture as unlike Jacky Arnison as well could be. There were also all the Michauds, and some other people whom Hilda recognised, having seen them since her arrival in the North.

At last Octa turned over a page, and said, "And those are the Bradens, all of them. Is not Sir Paul a dear old man ? And that is Lady Braden, of course ; but she does not look like that now ; this photo was taken before poor Paul died. That is Paul ; but sisters say it is not much like him ; and this is Walter—who will be Sir Walter one of these days. Oh ! I think he has the nicest face ; he is such a dear—at least, he was before he went away ; he let us ride his pony, and he taught us to fish, and he got us ferns for our fernery out of a deep ravine at Bradenshope, where we could not go because of the rocks and the snakes. And he tamed Cynthia's rabbit that used to bite at us when we fed him, and he reared us a lot of

dormice; he was just like our eldest brother, you know, and we *were* so fond of him! I wish he would come back; he might, if his father and mother couldn't bear it."

"And who are these ladies?"

"Oh, those are Walter's sisters. The first is Mary; she is married, you know, to Mr. Crosbie, and lives in London nearly all her time. And that is Christina—people say she is like poor Paul; and those two are the youngest, Agnes and Emily. These were at school at Dresden; but I think they have left now, for they are quite young women. Isn't Emily pretty? I always liked her best of them all; but they are all nice."

"What was Mr. Paul's illness?"

"I don't know. He died quite suddenly; we had not heard that he was poorly even, when one morning last year, as we were at our Bible lesson with mamma, papa came in, looking, oh, so solemn, and as white as could be, and he said, 'My dear, I have just had sad news from Bradenshope.' And mamma turned pale, too, and said, with a sort of gasp, '*Not Letitia?*' Letitia is Lady Braden; they always call each other Letty and Rosa. And papa's answer was, 'No, no, but young Paul is dead.' And then we were sent away, and we did the rest of our lessons with Alice, and she could not keep from crying. Mamma went over to Bradenshope, and stayed with Lady Braden till after the funeral; but I could never find out what poor Paul died of. Don't tell, Hilda, but I have heard some talk, and I think he was murdered, or else he killed himself."

"Oh, dreadful! Surely not! Why should he kill himself? And he could not have been murdered, because everybody would have heard of it, and the murderer would have been tried for his life."

"I ought not to have said anything about it, only you seem like one of ourselves now. Please say nothing; we never talk about poor Paul."

"I will not repeat what you have told me; still, I think you must be mistaken. Is Bradenshope a pretty place?"

"Lovely! We have a picture of it, and, now I come to think of it, there is a sketch in Irene's album; I will ask her for it."

But before Octa could execute her intention, there was a general move. Mr. Arnison came in to announce that the night was extremely fine, and that the ice was waiting for the skaters. He had not seen Hilda before, for he and Louis had taken tea in the counting-house, as they sometimes did when particularly engaged. He kissed her as they met, and as he did so he felt the thinness of her sleeve, and at once exclaimed, "You are not going out in this rag, surely? Mamma! come here—here is your niece Hilda bent upon getting bronchitis, and influenza, and chronic rheumatism! Her dress is a mere summer cashmere; why, our girls would not dream of putting such a thing on later than September, and not then if the season was chilly. Oh! we cannot let her go like this."

"Indeed, no!" said Mrs. Arnison, feeling at Hilda's light attire. "My dear child, you are not half clad! How could you dream of coming out no more warmly dressed? No wonder you are half frozen!"

Again Hilda was silent, and her cheeks burnt as if they were still over the lard-kettle; but seeing that some reply was waited for, she answered, "My sealskin is *very* warm, I assure you."

"No doubt; but that only covers your arms and shoulders. Well, 'not to put too fine a point on it,' as Mr. Snagsby used to say, you want more petticoats, Hilda. Take her upstairs, mamma, and rig her out yourself," was Mr. Arnison's ultimatum.

"Oh, no!" pleaded Hilda; "pray do not give yourself the trouble; I shall do very well; I am quite warm now."

"Yes; by the fireside," returned Mrs. Arnison. "My dear, it is no trouble, and you will not do well at all, if you go out such a night as this in summer skirts. Indeed, I shall not permit it; I cannot imagine how Aunt Dorothy came not to interfere. Come with me."

Hilda followed her aunt to her own chamber, and then commenced a motherly examination of more garments than the cashmere dress. Mrs. Arnison was horrified. "I hope you may not have caught your death, Hilda, for not only is your dress unlined, but the petticoat under it is nothing thicker than a twill of some cotton material. My dear, I thought you were a sensible girl; common

sense ought to teach you to suit your dress to the season and to the climate. It is worse than foolish to pay no regard to the rules of health. What is it, my dear?"

For Hilda was on the point of bursting into tears. She was actually crying for the third time that day. As she sobbed and blushed to the roots of her hair, something like a glimmering of the truth broke upon Mrs. Arnison—and yet, no!—she argued, a girl in Hilda's former position must have had any quantity of clothes. Only, she was now in mourning, and perhaps only mourning for summer wear had been provided.

"My dear," she resumed, "perhaps you did not bring all your wardrobe to Endlestone?"

"I did not," was Hilda's almost inaudible reply.

"But have you really no winter-clothes with you?"

"I am afraid not, aunt. I did not think; I always ordered what I wanted at every change of season—and—but—I hope you will not think ill of me when I tell you the truth. It was not my fault, though I suppose I ought to have attended more to my own concerns."

"Tell me anything you like, my love, and be sure I will not blame you if I can help it."

"It is dreadful; but—none of my things were paid for; for months and months I wore finery that was not my own. Even this dress, that is so unfit for this weather, was never paid for. It is no more mine than any dress in the draper's shop. I am afraid I have nothing that is paid for, except the sealskins; I bought those myself, and paid for them out of my own private purse. So those are mine, and I could honestly bring them with me."

"Do you mean that you would not bring things that you owed for?"

"I was obliged to bring some, or I should have had actually and literally nothing to wear. But I brought only what I thought I could not do without. When Madame's bill came in, and I saw what it amounted to, and knew that it never could be settled in the proper way, I felt like a common thief. There were a good many things I had never worn, and so I begged Madame to take them back. Aunt Mowbray was very angry with me, and said I should soon repent my folly. I had hand-

some dresses for several years, she said, if I chose to take them."

"But Madame would not take back anything that had been once worn, surely? You must have had abundance of dresses in wear?"

"Yes, though not mourning dresses. Those were all quite new, of course, and very handsome. But Madame was not the only person to whom money was owing; I had always ordered things, regardless of expense, never thinking of paying for them; aunt was supposed to pay for everything, you know, and she did pay for most things—that is, up to a certain time. Well, when the crash came, and bills poured in upon us, I found that I was in debt to every one I had employed—even to Patty, my maid, as well as to the lace-mender, and the laundress, and the poor sempstress who did my plain sewing, and many other people, who would be put to great inconvenience, if not ruined, by the loss of so much money. I felt at my wits' end, for I had nothing worth mentioning in my purse, and I saw no way of replenishing it. Till suddenly I remembered a part of a novel I had read a little while before, in which the heroine, being in sad straits, made quite a lucrative bargain with a person who kept a 'Ladies' Wardrobe,' if you know what that is."

"A place where second-hand garments are bought cheaply, and sold again to as much profit as possible, I believe."

"Just so, and I determined to try if I could not myself make a few pounds in that way. I took my faithful Patty into my confidence, and she managed the business for me, and though some of my best things went at what Patty called 'an alarming sacrifice,' I really got a good deal of money together, enough to pay the debts that burdened my mind most heavily, leaving a little for my own current unavoidable expenses."

"So little, I imagine, that you have not sufficient for proper outlay at present?"

"That is just it, aunt. And I could not bear to say anything about my dress, and until this morning, though I have had several shivering fits, I never realised how

impossible it was to make it *do* through the winter. I fancied I could make shift, as people say, but I don't think I can ; it feels like nothing, this thin, cool, much-worn cashmere."

" My dear child, you should have spoken. How could Aunt Dorothy let you go about the house so unsuitably clad ? "

" She did not notice, I think. It does not *look* so airy as it really is ; and aunt's sight is not so good as it was, she says."

" Well, we must attend to you now. And, my dear, let me tell you how much I respect you for disposing of your wardrobe as you did ; you acted honourably and nobly. Poor child ! You must have been most cruelly tried."

" And it came upon me so suddenly. In the morning I was as happy and thoughtless as a bird ; in the evening I was bowed down, stunned by the terrible grief that fell upon me. I do not like to think of it."

" But did not Mrs. Mowbray superintend your packing at all ? Did she not look after your future comforts as far as possible ? "

" Aunt Mowbray did all she could ; she would have had me return nothing ; she was very angry because I would send back a very rich black silk I had never worn. So she washed her hands of me, she said, and left me to do the best I could for myself. I do not wonder, for I could not take her advice, and she thought I would not, and reproached me with obstinacy. It was only quite natural."

" What did she say to your selling your best clothes ? "

" She knew nothing about it. I kept my own counsel. I don't know that I was right, but I thought I was justified in acting as I did without consulting her. She gave me to understand that henceforth I must expect nothing from her ; that she could afford me neither support nor protection ; that her guardianship, in fact, ended with my father's life. And such being the case, it seemed to me that I might please myself in the matter of what was legally, though not morally, my own. Do you think I was wrong ? "

" As far as I can see, and from what you have told me,

I think you very far from being wrong. I shall be proud of my niece who had right-mindedness and strength of purpose sufficient to carry her triumphantly through so painful an episode in her history. Only a woman of genuine principle would have acted as you did, Hilda. And now, my love, let me attend to your evening toilet, for the skating has commenced, I know, and I want you to have your share of the fun. There are some things of Irene's which I am sure she will be delighted to lend you, and you are so nearly of a height. Here, to begin with, is a thick under-skirt of my own, and Irene's brown winsey skirt over it will do nicely. Put on your sealskin, and muffle up your neck, and tie something over your head to keep your ears warm—I have no patience with those little hats that leave the face all exposed to wind and weather. The young women of the present day must make up their minds to be martyrs to neuralgia—which, by the bye, we used, in my young days, to call *tic-doloreux*."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE SKATING PARTY.

" The stars were shining o'er us,
In that eventful hour,
And rose the solemn mountains,
Girt with majesty and power;
Hush'd was the river's murmur,
The streams were silent all,
And the silence of the midnight
Hung o'er us like a pall."

IT was a beautiful night, though intensely, bitterly cold. Mr. Arnison was right; there would be no further snow-fall while the severe frost continued. The thermometer had sunk many degrees since morning, and now the ground was hard as iron, the snow itself was almost as

firm as the ice, and the ice was smooth as glass and unyielding as solid marble. Overhead the purple heavens were thick with lustrous stars; there was no moon, but the pale snow-glimmer showed where, like Titans of an ancient world, the mighty hills stood up against the starlit sky. Hilda exclaimed with pleasure, as she came out at last, warmly clad and duly muffled-up, into the great meadow, at the further end of which was the skating pool.

Several large fires had been lighted on the margin, and men were still busily heaping fuel on the blazing piles. A little shed near at hand was turned for the nonce into a refreshment-room, and hot coffee and tea, soup and cherry-bounce, were being made ready for those who should presently require them. Already shouts of laughter resounded everywhere, for many of Mr. Arnison's neighbours had arrived to share in the pleasant sport, and the pool was well covered with skaters and merry sliders.

"Here you are, then!" said Mr. Arnison, as his wife and her niece came up. "Yes! now she looks something like! fit to laugh defiance in the face of old King Winter. Let Louis fit you on some skates, my dear, and get into action as quickly as possible; it is quite too cold to stand still. And, mamma, I am not sure that I can let you remain; nothing but perpetual motion will keep you from freezing."

"Just a few minutes, my dear, to see how the children enjoy themselves; I will go in the moment I feel the cold. And mind you do not stand still too long yourself; there is such a thing as rheumatism, you know, and middle-aged gentlemen are liable to an attack."

"I had several twinges a week ago in the mild, damp weather; but this keen, dry air suits me well enough, old lady. Now, Louis, have you found a pair of skates for Hilda? Make haste, and get her into trim. If you will stop here, mamma, you might as well see that the coffee is nice and hot, and we shall be crying out for sandwiches presently."

Hilda was soon equipped, and though at first she was rather timid, she soon began to find herself at home on

the ice, and was ere long dancing a quadrille with Cynthia for a partner, the tune being hummed by the dancers.

"How do you like it?" asked Louis Michaud, when more than an hour later both he and Hilda were resting to recover breath.

"I like it amazingly," she replied; "I think it is absolutely delightful; I had no idea so much fun was to be got out of ice and skates."

"And you are not cold?"

"I am as warm as a toast! all the more that for some time I had a little difficulty in preserving my equilibrium. What is that rope there for?"

"To keep people from that end of the pool. It is so much sheltered by the high bank and the wall and the overhanging trees that it always freezes late, and is therefore accounted insecure when the frost sets in suddenly as it has done now, or when the cold first begins to slacken. I dare say it is all right, but it is best to be on the safe side, and Mr. Arnison is a prudent man."

"I wish he were not quite so prudent," said young Fred Baskerville, who just then came up; "that piece of ice being railed off spoils the whole thing; it cuts off the exact curve one wants. Why, almost a third of the pool lies beyond that foolish rope. I've a great mind to overleap it."

"You may do so if you choose," replied Michaud, gravely, "though I think such a proceeding would scarcely be courteous towards our host, who certainly has every right to make what regulations he sees fit on his own property. I saw young Beverly cross the line not many minutes since, and I thought——"

"Well, what did you think?"

"That he was both foolish and ill-behaved. If he had not sufficient space at this end of the water, why did he not go down to the great bend of the river?"

"Oh! all the rabble of the town goes there, and this piece of water answers every purpose, or would answer it, if only that ridiculous, tiresome rope were away. Can't you get Mr. Arnison to remove it? The ice is as safe there as here, or anywhere."

"I will speak to him; but Mr. Arnison has always such

good reasons for his orders that I feel sure he will not rescind them."

"Men of his age are apt to get over-cautious."

"In such a case over-caution, even to excess, is better than a little rashness. I dare say the ice up there *is* safe; but it might not be! and *then*—?"

"Then we should be well ducked! Who cares for a cold bath? Ah! I forgot; you Frenchmen don't like tubbing; you are horribly afraid of splashing in cold water, but Englishmen are naturally aquatic animals."

There was a sneer in Baskerville's voice as he spoke, and two or three other young fellows, who had come up to join in the confabulation, began to laugh, but Louis kept his temper.

"I will ask Mr. Arnison if the rope may be taken away," he said; "it is he who must decide. And a ducking is not all that might ensue if the ice gave way; the pool slopes from the opposite end, and under the bank there, I believe, it is deep enough to drown the tallest man."

"Ah, you *believe*," interposed Baskerville, with another sneer. "And *I* believe, M. Michand, that you are as timid as a girl; I wonder you are not afraid of going near the dye-vats, lest you should tumble in and be ingloriously drowned."

At that moment Mr. Arnison, who, perhaps, heard voices raised in altercation, came himself upon the scene, and Louis at once preferred the young man's request.

"These *gentlemen*, sir"—with just a little stress on the word—"are anxious that the rope should be removed. They say it spoils the skating."

"It must spoil it, then," replied Mr. Arnison, rather sharply. "I am not going to let people risk their lives in my quarters; there's the river for any one who wants to explore the bottom of the stream."

"But, sir," urged Mr. Charles Beverly, of the Endlestone Bank, "there is no risk. I stepped over the rope, just to try, and I assure you that the ice beyond is as firm as the solid land. Why, the thermometer must be down to zero."

"Below it, I should say," grumbled a sulky young

fellow, who was Dr. Clayton's assistant, and who always, on principle, opposed the powers that be, and asserted his own opinions. "The ice will no more give than Endle Fell will move from its foundations. If there was a thaw, now—well, there *might* be some risk of a cold plunge-bath."

"Risk or not, sir," replied Mr. Arnison, in a displeased tone, "I refuse absolutely to touch the rope. The water at that end of the pool is ten feet deep, if it is an inch. I am not going to peril the life of any one here, if I can help it, and I repeat that the ice up there is *not* sound; it has not had time to get into safe condition; another day or two, if the frost still holds, will make all the difference. Those who object to my rules may go down to the River Broads and drown or duck themselves at pleasure." And then Mr. Arnison turned away; and immediately afterwards a servant came to Louis Michaud, to tell him that his presence was desired for a few minutes in the principal dye-house. A man who was watching some experiment wanted further orders.

"I say," said Beverly, when they were left to themselves, "what an old buffer Arnison is! And as obstinate as a pig! He'd keep the rope there now out of sheer perversity, even though the pond were solid to the bottom."

"It's all to show his authority," snarled the ill-tempered young doctor, Alick Brown; "the water is no more ten feet deep than I am ten feet high! And if it were, and if we got a souse, that's our own look-out. We've a right to do what we like with ourselves, I suppose; we ain't schoolboys. I hate that frog of a Frenchman, Louis Michaud!"

"Nay! he's a good fellow enough," put in Mr. Beverly, "only he's a bit of a prig, and he *is* a Frenchman."

"All Frenchmen are cowards at heart," said Alick Brown. "Didn't we beat 'em at Waterloo? I dare say Mounseer Louis is afraid of catching cold or of spoiling his new overcoat. It would be grand fun to cut the rope."

"Well, I shouldn't exactly like to do that," observed Baskerville. "It isn't quite the thing to set a man at defiance on his own property, you know. If it were

public ground, I'd soon show him that old fogies can't always have their own sweet will and way."

"I vote we go and get something hot!" cried another young man; "it's rather too cold to stand still debating."

"There's nothing more potent than cherry-bounce," returned Baskerville, with another sneer; "when we give a skating-party, I'll make the governor turn out some good cognac and whisky. I knew Arnison's little foibles, and provided against them."

"And so did I," interrupted Beverly, drawing a full-sized travelling-flask from his pocket.

"And I also!" laughed Brown, following Beverly's example; "there is nothing like a drop o' the craythur for keeping out the cold. Cherry-bounce be blowed!"

"Don't be vulgar," replied Baskerville, pretending to be shocked. "Stop, now! there's Miss Florence looking this way; don't let her see us taking our private refreshment. Step a bit further back into the shadow. The fires are getting low."

As indeed they were, for the hour was rather late for sober country folks, and the cold was becoming more and more intense. The men had received orders to let the fires die down after nine o'clock. Mrs. Arnison had long since retired, followed by her younger daughters, and several of the neighbours had already bidden good-night; there were now not more than a dozen people on the ice, and as there was no moon, a faint glow from the smouldering piles was all the light that illuminated the scene. Hilda had wonderfully enjoyed herself; that confidential little talk with her aunt had eased her heart and lightened her spirits; the kindness she had experienced on all hands so cheered her, that she felt for the moment almost restored to her vivacious old self. She was just then more like the joyous Hilda of Belgravian drawing-rooms than the grave, pensive Hilda of Endlestone. She was entering most fully into the amusement, and had polked and waltzed with all her cousins in capital time and style.

"Do you know the *valse à trois-temps*?" she said to Louis, who, having returned, proposed that they should take one good round together before they left the pool.

"No, I do not," was his reply; "but I dare say I could soon learn. Will you teach me?"

"With pleasure," replied Hilda; and Louis had a lesson on the spot, but failed to catch the rhythm of the waltz.

"I could do it without my skates," he said; "after all, one step is much like another step on the ice, but I can't just get the right time; I must try again at home, Miss Capel, if you will repeat your instructions, and in return I will teach you a *mazurka* that I never saw danced in England."

"Thank you! Now, then, I will have a *valse* by myself, I think. I rather enjoy dancing without a partner."

"You are naturally fond of dancing?"

"I believe I am. I love dancing as the waves and the tree-tops love it—for its own sake. I like the motion and the measured movement, irrespective of the music and the gaiety. In fact, I never enjoyed a ball more, if as much, as I have enjoyed this *al fresco*, very *al fresco*, dance on the ice to-night, with my cousins and yourself for partners; no music, but what we hummed ourselves; no lights, but those smouldering bonfires; no flowers, and no dress, but these wraps that make us look like Esquimaux. It is capital fun! The most severe of censors could not object to the Indigo House dancing, surely?"

And before Louis could reply, Hilda, humming the opening bars of the "Morgenblätter," flew off, and was soon lost to sight in the dense darkness that now enveloped the pool. At that instant Louis' attention was called away by one of the girls, who could not unfasten her skates; nearly all the skaters were congregated at the end farthest away from the forbidden quarters. No one knew that the rope was gone, that it lay coiled up on the other side of the low stone wall; or rather, I should have said, only one person knew, and who that person was could never afterwards be discovered, as everybody present denied having played the abominable trick. Sulky Alick Brown, however, was generally supposed to be the culprit. Hilda, flying round and round at full speed, and at every turn enlarging her circle, never so much as thought of the barrier, which, earlier in the evening, had limited her progress. "I feel like a bird! I had no notion

skating could be so charming!" she was saying to herself. Then she remembered her ill-humour in the morning, and her lard-melting and pie-making experience in Mrs. Dorothy's kitchen. "What a funny day it has been altogether!" she continued. "I wish I need not go back to the Grey House to-morrow; I am sure I could be happy here; and Louis Michaud is not half so disagreeable as I fancied! One more turn, and then I will give up. I have not been in such spirits since—since—! What is the matter with me? Am I what the Scotch call *fey*, I wonder!"

Her reverie was broken off by a sudden, sharp noise, that sounded like the report of a pistol, and it seemed quite close at hand. She was startled, and turned to retrace her steps, at the same time discovering that she had reached the dangerous piece of ice, though how she could have passed the rope without knowing it, puzzled her exceedingly. Another moment, and the ice on which she stood seemed to rend and shake, and before she could collect her senses, her feet sank, and she felt the cold water flowing over them. She could only give one wild, shrill scream before she was overhead in the deepest part of the pool, for she had unfortunately paused to rest on the only spot where an accident was possible.

"*Mon Dieu!* Whose voice is that? Where is Miss Capel?" cried Louis, springing suddenly to his feet, leaving Miss Fanny Baskerville with her refractory skate still dangling. All ran to that end of the pool whence the shriek had come, but it was too dark to see anything distinctly, only Cynthia's keen eyes at once missed the rope, and she loudly proclaimed its disappearance. All was confusion and dismay; the young men who had complained of the barrier looked meaningly at each other, and felt a sudden thrill of horror. Baskerville dashed after Louis to the end of the pool, while Beverly tried to rouse into a flame the dying embers of the fire nearest the scene of the catastrophe, and there was a loud call for lights, and the girls shouted to "Papa," who had wandered away to the further side of the meadow with a leave-taking guest.

Mr. Arnison had heard the scream, and knew too well

what it portended ; he turned at once, and—as he said afterwards—with half-a-dozen strides, as it seemed to him, crossed the field and reached the deep end of the pool, where, on the banks, his daughters and some of their visitors were congregated.

“Who is it ?” he cried, hoarsely, seizing some one as he spoke.

“For God’s sake, get lights, some of you !” cried Louis, in his native tongue. “Yes ! the ice is broken ; there is a large hole just under the steep bank.” And without more ado he flung off his coat and waistcoat, and struggled out of his boots, and in another minute was diving in the freezing water, while Mr. Arnison ran frantically to the shed, where some tarred sticks were to be found. It seemed to him as if an age elapsed before these impromptu torches could be kindled, and even then they refused for the first minute or two to blaze up effectually. There was light enough at last, such as it was, and the lurid flame shone fitfully on the ice, and on the black water which flowed over it for a space of several yards. The ice was even thinner than Mr. Arnison had apprehended at that end of the pool, and, once split, it parted in all directions. But the more it broke up the better for the rescue ; nevertheless, Hilda had been quite five minutes submerged ere Louis bore her in his arms to the bank, and gave her to her uncle’s care.

“If this girl dies,” he cried, turning to Baskerville and his associates, as he hastened towards the house, “she is murdered by the wretch who dared to remove the barrier !” Both Fred Baskerville and young Beverly, and others, began to protest ; Alick Brown preserved a sulky silence. Louis fiercely bade them make way, as, dripping and freezing, he followed Mr. Arnison.

They found Mrs. Arnison already on the alert. One of the servants had flown to give the alarm that one of the young ladies was in the water ; and her mistress, though trembling in every limb, at once began to issue necessary orders. As Mr. Arnison approached with his burden, he met his wife, who cast one look of agony round on the faces about him to see which was the missing one. “It is Hilda !” she said, quickly ; “oh, my poor child !”

"Yes, it is Hilda," assented her husband, as he entered the kitchen, where he would be sure to find a good fire and plenty of hot water. "Don't be alarmed, love. God helping us, we shall soon bring her round, I hope. Now, girls, stand back; fetch blankets, brandy—everything that can be of use—and somebody run to Dr. Clayton's and bring him here, if he has not already set off. Alick Brown might have offered his assistance, whether it was accepted or not. Now, cook, help your mistress and Miss Arnison, and send all the other maids away. Irene, you had better remain, you always have your wits about you. Lily, take charge of Flossie, and don't let her go into hysterics, whatever you do; splash plenty of cold water in her face if she begins to scream, and give her two large spoonfuls of my *mixture*." The said "*mixture*" being a favourite cordial of Mr. Arnison's, offensive to the nose and nauseous to the palate, and compounded by himself as a sovereign remedy for obstinate hysterics, and chiefly for the benefit of his daughter Florence, who now and then had attacks of that mysterious malady, yclept *Hysteria*. "Plenty of cold water, and the mixture," generally proved effectual, even when taken in anticipation.

But it needed all the skill of Dr. Clayton and all the prompt action of Mrs. Arnison and her coadjutors to restore Hilda to consciousness.

Life returned so painfully and so slowly that all present began to fear the worst. At length, however, there was a faint colour in the lips, a slight pulse could be detected, the eyelids moved, and finally the sweet grey eyes slowly opened and looked vacantly around. For the present all was safe, and Mr. Arnison audibly thanked God, with all his heart, while Mrs. Arnison and the girls could not speak for the tears they were struggling to repress. It was past midnight before the doctor permitted his patient to be carried to the bedroom prepared for her, and even then he did not leave her, watching her carefully for yet another hour. Mrs. Arnison and Alice sat up; Irene was to be called, should her services be required; cook lay down on the settle by the kitchen fire, in order to keep up that and a good supply of hot water, and to be in readiness if wanted.

And so ended Mr. Arnison's memorable skating party.

"What is it? Where have I been?" asked Hilda, just as the red dawn began to flush the snow-covered slopes of lonely Endle Cragg. "I thought it was a dreadful dream! but why am I here?—and you——?"

"Hush, dear child, you must not speak a word till you have had some beef-tea."

Hilda took a spoonful or two, and then feebly turned aside her head. "I can't," she said; "it is so nasty, and I am sick, and oh! it hurts me to swallow; please, no more!"

"Yes! a little more, my love; it is medicine as well as food! There, that will do for the present; try to go to sleep again."

"I had rather not; I have dreamt so miserably all night. I thought I fell under the ice and was drowned. Was I?"

"No! not drowned; but you were in the water for a little while," replied Mrs. Arnison, thinking it better to satisfy Hilda at once rather than allow her to fret herself with vague remembrances and dread uncertainties. "You are to be kept very warm and quiet, Dr. Clayton says, and you are to be a good girl and obey implicitly."

"I recollect now. Yes! the ice cracked, and I got somehow to the deep end of the pool. Oh, the water was so cold, and it took my breath as I went down; I forgot the rest. Am I at the Blue House?"

"Yes, in the large spare room, and here you will stay till you are quite strong and well again. I have sent a messenger to the Grey House, and I dare say we shall have Aunt Dorothy here before the morning is over. You will have to spend your Christmas with us, Hilda."

"I shall not mind that," said Hilda, faintly. She was beginning now to feel very ill; she had pains in all her limbs, and her head was hot and heavy. She felt no desire to ask further questions, but it gave her a sweet sense of repose and security to know that she was in the safe keeping of her kind Aunt Rose; she only hoped Aunt Dorothy would not insist on her getting back somehow to the Grey House. She need not have feared; long ere Aunt Dorothy arrived, it was evident that her symptoms

were assuming a most serious aspect. The pain in her limbs increased, her head throbbed more and more; when she tried to think she could remember nothing distinctly; the room began slowly to turn round, the fireplace receded and receded till it became a mere glimmering spark in the far distance; there was a sound as of rushing waves in her ears; something held her like a vice when she tried to rise and go anywhere, she knew not, cared not, whither. Aunt Rose disappeared, and then Mrs. Mowbray, cold and scornful as in those last unhappy days, stood in her place; she even thought she saw Horace Trelawny come to the door and whisper to Irene, who next moment turned into little Patty. When, just before noon, Mrs. Dorothy arrived, Hilda was talking nonsense, and begging Mr. Trelawny not to drown her in the Serpentine!

CHAPTER XV.

PARDON AND PEACE.

" My heart is resting, O my God—
I will give thanks and sing ;
My heart is at the secret source
Of every precious thing ;
Now the frail vessel Thou hast made
No hand but Thine shall fill,
For the waters of this world have failed,
And I am thirsty still."

FOR several weeks Hilda lay between life and death in all the agonies of rheumatic fever. Not only was she suffering from the effects of her immersion under the ice, but from the severe cold which she had doubtless contracted before the evening of the skating party. It would have been, indeed, a wonder little short of a miracle if she had escaped the penalty of her unseasonable garments; the only surprise was that she had not fallen ill several weeks earlier.

"But she has a splendid constitution," said Dr. Clayton to Mrs. Arnison, when Hilda was at the worst; "that is her only chance—that and her youth. Had there been the slightest taint of disease, inherited or otherwise, there would have been no hope for her; as it is, it will take all my skill, and all your own and your daughters' best nursing, to pull her through."

"It is, then, a decided case of danger?"

"A *very* decided case of danger; it is useless to disguise the truth. As I said, she has a chance; but it is quite upon the cards that in spite of every care the dear young lady may slip through our fingers. There will be danger of relapse for a long time; and her convalescence, should she ever arrive at that, will be tedious and lingering. Do you know, in spite of her excellent stamina, she gives me the idea of a person who has to some extent broken down after protracted struggle and endurance? Has there been —excuse me if I seem inquisitive, but it would be well that I should know something of the nature of her trouble, if there be any—has there been any unfortunate love affair? any enacting of 'Patience on a monument, smiling at grief,' &c.?"

"The girl has had no end of trouble, and even I do not know the worst. She lost suddenly, without the least preparation, and all in one day, as it were, her lover, her father, and her fortune." And Mrs. Arnison gave the doctor, who was an old friend of the family, and in every way to be trusted, a hasty outline of Hilda's melancholy story.

The kind-hearted man was really affected. "She must be a plucky sort of girl," he said, "to be the victim of so many heavy calamities, and present so brave a front before the world. She has gone through enough to kill half-a-dozen ordinary girls. However, I trust, with God's blessing, we shall have her up again, though not just yet. She is now so near the grave that if she recover it will be almost like beginning a new life; may it be a new life in every way! may she know better days than even those of her prosperity! At the same time, I fear, she may never be quite as strong as she has been. An illness of this kind leaves serious traces, you know."

"Yes, I do know. But only let the fever cease, and we will soon nurse her back into comparative health and strength. And if she remain delicate, the more care and attention she must receive."

Mrs. Dorothy, of course, was shocked when she made the discovery that Hilda was really suffering, and that not slightly, from the inclement atmosphere, on the morning when she had been so displeased with what she took to be her childish petulance and depression on account of the cold weather. "I cannot think where my eyes were," she said ruefully; "but I never suspected that the girl was unsuitably clad, still less that she wore her poor rag of a gown because she had nothing warmer to put on. Why did she not speak to me?"

"I suppose—I know, indeed—she felt a delicacy in applying to you for clothes so soon after her arrival."

"Nonsense! I have no patience with false delicacy, which is only another name for foolish pride. I have stinted Hilda in nothing since she came; she has shared my table and my hearth, and lain as softly and warmly as myself; and had I only known the state of her wardrobe, she might have had any reasonable quantity of thick petticoats, and chosen her own winsey or merino at Richardson's! Why *didn't* she speak? If she were not so ill, Rose, I should feel dreadfully provoked."

"I think she compared your simple—shall I call it Spartan?—mode of life with the luxury of past days, and felt afraid—*reluctant*, perhaps I should say—to trouble you with her requirements. You know, Aunt Dorothy, even my girls, who are no sybarites, think your rule and discipline a little, just a little, severe."

"Young people in the present day are sinfully pampered and spoilt. I don't mean any reflection on thee, Rose; as the world goes thou art reasonably strict; but really, I lose my patience, and wonder what the next generation will be like, if all the boys and girls are to be kept, so to speak, wrapped up in cotton wool, and fare sumptuously every day. In my time things were far otherwise; we were taught to bear privation and even pain, to deny ourselves, and to cultivate as Christian duties temperance and patience. Now, all that is thought of is ease and

amusement ; there is nothing to brace either mind or body. Believe me, Rose, the men and women now growing up will be but poor specimens of their race."

" I do not agree with you, Aunt Dorothy, though there is much sense and truth in what you say. The old regimen was either kill or cure, and all the weaker people were quietly and unwittingly killed. Very few minds were strong enough to right themselves after the severe discipline of their youth, even if their bodies escaped actual injury. You were an exception ; but how few there were, or are, who do not deplore some sad and irretrievable errors in their own training."

" And try to repair them by rushing to the other extreme ! by letting their own children go their own wild way, leading a useless, self-seeking life of ease and weak indulgence. Where we plunged into ice-cold water, they lave their delicate limbs with rose-water, or milk of roses ; where we lay on hard mattresses, they slumber on beds of down — ”

" Nay, nay, dear aunt ! " interrupted Mrs. Arnison ; " I really cannot allow that impeachment to pass unchallenged. No one in his senses, young or old, sleeps now on down, and spring-mattresses have altogether superseded feather beds, except among the most old-fashioned and behind-hand people. Nurse has the only feather bed in this house ; it is her little weakness to prefer feathers, and she complains that the spring-mattresses are cold and ' wobble about ! ' Poor old nurse ! She is not as young as she was, so we just let her be comfortable in her own way."

" Well ! the feather beds I retract. All mine are in the garrets ; they were my mother's, you know, or I should never have possessed them. But, to tell the truth, Rose, I saw, before Hilda Capel had been forty-eight hours under my roof, that she had had no bringing-up at all—that she was idle, dreamy, helpless, and accustomed to all kinds of enervating and self-indulgent habits. She disliked early rising, she shrank from cold water, she hated open-air exercise, she avoided wholesome occupation, she liked best to cower over the fire, frittering her time away with a novel in her hand, or trifling with

a little bit of useless needlework. I saw all this quite plainly, and as days went on my opinion was confirmed. It seemed to me to be my duty to remedy the defects in Hilda's education ; she was young and healthy, and a new career was before her ; I thought it wisest, therefore, to begin as we were to go on. New surroundings, new experiences, *ought* to help one to form new habits."

"Undoubtedly, and there is much wisdom in all you say, Aunt Dorothy ; only, you see, you have never brought up any young people, and it is so wonderfully easy—I speak from personal experience—to form splendid theories, so very difficult to reduce them to practice."

"Your girls are very fond of me ; they like coming to the Grey House, notwithstanding my severity," said Mrs. Dorothy, a little piqued, and not a little pained. The good old lady had anticipated great things from the judicious training to which she had subjected Hilda's imperfect character. She had mulcted her in bedroom fires and hot water on principle, and she had set her to stir the lard-kettle with the very best intentions. She had roused her continually from day-dreams, as she called the girl's sad reveries, and that without unkindness ; and she had forced her out into the open air on damp or freezing days, from the most conscientious motives. She thought she had done it all so discreetly and yet so firmly, and that she so perfectly understood what it was that her charge needed to mould her into a sensible, noble-minded Christian gentlewoman. And yet she had failed—ignominiously, as it seemed to her, since she had quite neglected the motherly oversight which would have provided her with necessary winter garments.

"I suppose I blundered," she said, sadly, "and I suspect one cannot deal with a young woman of eighteen as with a child. And yet your elder girls are in as good order as the little ones in the nursery."

"Better, I hope, for the little ones only do as they are told ; the elders have learned self-government. It is my belief, Aunt Dorothy, that if you properly train a boy or girl till he or she is fourteen or fifteen, you may leave that boy or girl very largely to himself or herself, ever

after. It is a bad thing to have to teach your children obedience, and to be obliged to chide and check them, just as they are feeling themselves grown men and women. Ralph and I are quite agreed in this matter; we require implicit obedience from the first; as the child grows older we gradually slacken the reins; at a certain age, which of course varies with character, we drop them altogether, except upon emergency. Parental authority, as such, must cease sooner or later—parental influence lasts for ever. Children who in every difficulty turn instinctively to their parents for guidance, help, or comfort, are far happier, and far safer, than those who simply submit from necessity or ordinary rule. I have known my husband, when he was thirty years of age, and the father of a family, go to his mother, who was one of the wisest women I ever knew, for her opinion or her counsel. She never commanded, if she could help it, but no female despot ever swayed the heart of her children as she did. To her dying day her sons, all men grown, would do nothing unless it met with her approval. Oh, Aunt Dorothy, the power of love is immense, illimitable! Love breaks the heart when nothing else can bend it. Love was the one Divine principle left to man when he fell from his first estate. Love conquers all things—even the great conqueror Death must yield to Love."

"Thou speakest of the love that is between parent and child?"

"I speak of all pure, true love—of the Divine as of the human. It is the bond that keeps this troublous world together; it is the one link between this earth and heaven. There is still some trace of God's image left in the most depraved wretch who can love unselfishly; he who loves cannot be wholly vile."

"Thou speakest of the love that is common to all—not only of the love that is between man and woman?"

"Undoubtedly! The love that is between man and woman is God-appointed, and the most blessed and most perfect phase of Love; but it is *only* a phase! The chief is not the whole; far from it. It is not given to all to know the depth and sweetness of wedded love; but no creature breathes who may not share the blessedness of

the great principle of love—that relic of Eden lost, and that pledge of a fairer Eden yet to come.”

“The question is—‘What *is* Love?’ The love thou speakest of is neither passion nor benevolence.”

“And yet it accords with either. Passion without love is base; benevolence without love—if indeed it can so exist—must be apt to degenerate into mere perfunctory service or alms-giving. But, Aunt Dorothy, you know what love is as well as I. You are unselfish, and unselfishness and love are sworn friends and partners.”

“And yet I have not made Hilda love me! I had a sort of dream—for I, too, can dream—of our becoming like mother and daughter. I thought she would be the child of my old age. Thou knowest, Rose, thou wouldest not give me one of thine own girls, though thou hast so many—not one for my very own—and my heart craved for something young and fair to cherish, and, at the same time, to mould to my own idea of goodness; and then Hilda seemed providentially confided to my charge—my unhappy nephew’s own child, who was deserted by that worthless woman, who spent her money and pretended to bring her up for her own mean, selfish ends. And now I believe we are further apart than when we met for the first time.”

“I think we have all made a mistake about Hilda, Aunt Dorothy. We have never invited her confidence; we have never given her a true and tender sympathy.”

“I thought it best to let the dead past bury its dead. Nothing that Hilda had lost could possibly be retrieved. It is only weakness that dwells on the irrevocable. Last summer’s sere leaves, last winter’s vanished snow, may be recalled when lost faith and lost hopes can be restored.”

“Is there any keener pain than to lose faith? Are there not wounds which only God’s great healer—*time*—can cure? Do not lost hopes leave a void behind them which only God can fill? And I think our merciful Father must feel very tenderly towards those who have suffered such utter shipwreck of their youthful faith and hopes.”

“But Hilda is so very reserved; she scarcely refers to her old life. She has one friend in London—a Miss

Sandys—with whom she corresponds; perhaps she confides in her."

"It may be so; but, when all is said and done, I take blame to myself that I have not, ere this, secured Hilda's confidence. I ought to have had so much pity for her; I who know what her unhappy father really was."

"Can any one know better than I?" said Mrs. Dorothy, almost bitterly. "Oh, Rose! I cannot speak of it even now; but thou knowest how he blighted all my woman's life by his dreadful treachery, his cruel, cruel fraud! I mean," she added, more softly, "he blighted it as far as man could blight. I don't really believe in broken hearts and blighted lives; God gives strength to all who will seek and strive for it."

"I think God sometimes permits a life to be maimed, just as He allows a limb to be lost. Why, we cannot tell; some day we shall know all about it. Only we are sure now, that whatever is, is well, divinely, wholly well. We must be content to wait for the why and wherefore, till we see face to face!"

"Byron wrote—'The heart may break, yet brokenly live on.' I am no admirer of Byron, yet he did say some things that are wonderfully true, and that is one of them."

"It is a truth as far as it goes, I suppose, and only so far. I would not dwell on it, if I were in deep distress; I would rather think of the peace that cannot be taken away, except indeed by *sin*; I would rather look forward to the glory that is to be revealed, when the tried spirit parts from flesh and blood. The scars that will always remain here will be healed entirely where there is no more sorrow and no more pain."

"Rose, thou hast the best of it. It should be as thou sayest, my dear; only flesh and blood are weak, and—I fear me—never so weak, never so near failure, as when they believe themselves strongest. I am afraid I expected from poor Hilda the courage and composure which I have barely attained, only after long years of discipline and struggle. And now I think we have talked enough—I confess thou hast beaten me with my own weapons. Now, shall we go upstairs?"

This was in the early days of Hilda's illness, when her

malady, as yet unchecked, might any hour take a fatal course. There was no lack of nurses, and all Aunt Rose's daughters were born and trained nurses, and all took their part, even to Cynthia, though the elders were of course the responsible authorities. Aunt Dorothy wished much to take her turn, and one night she did sit up to share Irene's watch; but she could not do much, the invalid was more than ordinarily fractious, for the fever ran high, and though she partly recognised her cousin, she seemed generally unconscious of her present circumstances or surroundings, and some kind of uneasiness seemed to possess her the moment Aunt Dorothy offered her ministrations. Once she awoke for a moment to a clearer comprehension of her state, and seeing Mrs. Dorothy bending over her, she said, piteously, "Oh! please *don't* take me back to the Grey House!"

It was said in such a weak and childish tone, that the dear old lady could not be displeased, and yet the words and the look pierced her to the heart. The Grey House was clearly a penitentiary rather than a home to Hilda. She did not even call it *home*; it was just the "Grey House," a place where she was obliged to live, and from which she was thankful to escape. Mrs. Dorothy had suspected this; her young inmate was always so glad to be with her cousins at the Blue House; yet—as she told herself—this was only perfectly natural. Excepting the maid Nancy, there was no person of Hilda's age at the Grey House; and though it was a mansion of content to its mistress, it might very possibly be a dull residence for a girl not out of her teens and accustomed to frequent change and to society. She shrewdly guessed that if Hilda were at all reconciled to her lot, it was because of the vicinity of the Blue House; without her cousins she would have felt buried alive. Mrs. Dorothy was not jealous—she was of too noble a nature for miserable jealousy; but it saddened her to find how little she had attached to herself the girl whom she had intended to make her daughter. "To think," she said to herself as she sat silently by Hilda's bedside, and behind the curtain, because the sight of her made the sufferer more restless—"to think that she would not ask me for

one paltry frock, when she wanted it as much as any of my poor pensioners needed a winter garment! What a mockery it must have seemed to her to sit sewing at those flannel petticoats for old Becky and Aggie and the others, when she was herself shivering for want of clothes, poor child! How shall I make her know me, as I really am? How shall I teach her to love and not to fear me? But oh! perhaps she will never come back to me. She is very ill, worse than I thought, and I can see that Dr. Clayton is not very hopeful. Rose says I am unselfish; I fear she is mistaken; here am I thinking of my own disappointment while the child herself is on the brink of the grave."

Christmas came and went, and still Hilda lay on her bed, now a little better and now worse; now dully conscious of what passed about her, and now again delirious, and nearly always racked with pain. She could not do the least thing for herself, she could not even lift her hand, or turn upon her pillow; all began to fear that in spite of the sound constitution and excellent physique on which the doctor founded all his hopes, the disease would be too much for her. At last came an access of pain and fever, which might be the turning point, and for several days the struggle went on, till the patient's strength was so far exhausted that only the worst results could be anticipated.

Night and day her aunts and her uncle and her cousins watched her, and Dr. Clayton was in and out of the house continually. "What do you think of her now?" was the frequent question; and as he marked the anxious gaze and tearful eyes of those who looked into his face, as though dreading his reply, he could only answer gravely, "She is in God's hands—He can raise her up." And so matters went on till the new year was in its second week, and then one evening the doctor called Mrs. Arnison aside, and told her that there was some slight improvement, but he doubted whether nature was not too much exhausted to make the necessary effort. If she lived a few hours longer, he should have strong hopes; but the spark of life was now such a feeble little flicker, that the greatest care, the most devoted watchfulness, must be exercised if it were to be fanned once more into a flame.

From that evening, however, there was a decided change—the malady seemed to have worn itself out. The symptoms most to be dreaded were excessive weakness and difficulty in swallowing; but these the loving nurses trusted they could combat. Never was princess of the blood more closely watched and tended than was Hilda Capel while the awful crisis lasted, and her spirit seemed to touch the boundary of either world. It passed, and left her weak as a new-born child, but perfectly conscious, and without fever in her veins.

"How long have I been here?" she asked, one January afternoon of her aunt Rose, who had laid down her work in the failing light.

"More than a month, dear," replied Mrs. Arnison. "You did not think you were going to pay us so long a visit, did you?"

"No, indeed; but I am quite happy to be here, only I must have given you no end of trouble."

"Our only trouble was on your account, dear child; do you know you are so much better, that Dr. Clayton thinks you may be lifted on to the sofa by Sunday, if you continue to improve?"

"Am I really better? Am I going to get well again, Aunt Rose?"

"I believe so, if we take great care of you, and if you are prudent yourself, and content to do as you are told. We have only now to feed you up, and keep you very warm and comfortable, and you must sleep as much as you can, and take all the kitchen physic that is given you."

Then there was a pause, the firelight shadows danced upon the wall, and the church clock tolled the second quarter of the hour. Outside, the grey dusk was falling fast on the cold, white fells and moors, and on the meadow-lands about the town. It had thawed and frozen again twice since the evening of the skating party, but Hilda had known nothing of changes of weather in the warm, even temperature of her sick chamber. At last she said—"Auntie dear, have I not been very near death?"

"Very near, Hilda! So near, that I think God has

some special work for you to do before He takes you from this world. Had you any perception of your own danger?"

"Oh, yes, frequently. It seems to me now like a long, painful dream ever since I felt the ice giving way under me; but there were times when I was quite sensible, and could think clearly, though I felt too ill to say a word; and then I thought I must be dying. I did not know it was so easy to die."

"And how did death seem to you?"

"I hardly know; but I thought of 'pardon and peace,' and I wondered if I were indeed near *home!* I thought, too, of all my wasted, careless life; I felt I had nothing to offer of my own—nothing to plead, only Christ's great love and mercy to poor sinners. And then I suppose I fell into a sort of stupor or half-sleep, for I dreamed, or seemed to dream; and I thought the Lord Himself stood by my bed and said to me, 'Daughter, thy sins are forgiven thee!' And then I awoke, and I felt that in that dream God had spoken to my soul, and 'pardon and peace' were no longer only words to me—I knew what they meant, for they were *mine*; and, auntie, I think I am sure they are *mine* now! And I understand the meaning of that 'no condemnation' in the eighth chapter of Romans, though it was such a mystery when I first heard it read at the Grey House one Sunday evening."

"But you must have heard it before, my dear."

"Oh, yes, with my outward ears the words were tolerably familiar, of course; but I attached no meaning to them, nor did I care in the least about their meaning. But everything is changed."

"That is how it is; when the heart is first turned to God, the soul has risen from death to life, old things have passed away, all things have become new, the least as well as the greatest. God has been very good to you, my child!"

"So good that I could cry for gratitude. It seems to me now the strangest thing that I never loved the Lord Jesus Christ before. And yet I think I had begun to love Him a little, though only a little. I could never forget those words uncle spoke that first Sunday afternoon,

'pardon and peace !' And then I heard them again, as I stood outside the little Methodist chapel, and they haunted me, till I felt I should never be at rest till I had them in my own soul—till I knew that every night I was a 'day's march nearer Home.' "



CHAPTER XVI.

A MORNING OF SURPRISES.

" So you think you love me, do you ?
 Well, it may be so ;
 But there are many ways of loving
 I have learnt to know.
 Many ways, and but one true way,
 Which is very rare;
 And the counterfeits look brightest,
 Though they will not wear."

FROM that day Hilda slowly but surely progressed, though it was a long time, and the days had lengthened out considerably, and the pale primroses were showing in the woods among last year's fallen leaves, before she was pronounced sufficiently recovered to return to the Grey House. And already the Arnisons were beginning to prepare for Alice's wedding, which was fixed for the second week in June. Hilda had made the acquaintance of John Goodman, Alice's future husband, and liked him very much—which was not wonderful, inasmuch as the young doctor was a universal favourite. Of her boy-cousin, Theodore, she had seen little, her illness being at its worst when he was at home for his Christmas holidays, and now he was again expected at the Blue House for the Easter vacation.

" How long have I been here ? " asked Hilda, one bright morning in early April, as she sat, with her three elder cousins, busily stitching away at some article of Alice's

trousseau. "I have been calculating, and it seems to me that it must be almost, if not quite, four months since I left Aunt Dorothy. I expect every day I shall be summoned to the Grey House."

"You cannot go yet," said Alice, "for we cannot spare you. And I do not see why you should go at all. Why not stay here in my place?"

"I could not fill your place, dear; besides, Aunt Dorothy expects me to return. My only wonder is that she has not ordered me back before. I was thinking, perhaps, I ought to go, or at least propose going of my own accord."

"There can be no 'ought' about it," said Flossie, and the others chimed in; they were quite as willing to keep Hilda with them as she was content to stay. She thought with much dismay of resuming the dull, monotonous life of the Grey House, and yet she was beginning to feel that duty called her thither; it was gradually dawning upon her that she owed a good deal to Aunt Dorothy, who had given her a home, and who stood to her in the place of a parent. By degrees Hilda was finding out that she had certain responsibilities, which, as a Christian woman, she could not and would not ignore; and one of them—the chief probably—was to fill worthily the place in which the hand of Providence had undoubtedly placed her.

"At any rate, you must not go till after Easter," said Irene. "John Goodman will be here for a day or two, if his patients will be so kind as to spare him, and Theodore comes home next week. Then we shall be complete; it would never do for you, who are quite one of us, to be away."

At that moment they heard manly steps on the landing outside; the girls were sitting in the morning-room upstairs—a room which was never used as a breakfast-room, and supposed to be entirely devoted to the occupation of the elder daughters of the family.

"There's Louis!" cried Flossie. "What can bring him here at this time of day? He does not enter this room once a month. He must be coming to see you, Hilda."

"He has something to tell us, I dare say," replied Hilda, colouring as she spoke. Of all her cousins,

Florence was the only one given to innuendo. No one else made jokes about *beaux* and sweethearts, and Alice and John had suffered much from her banter in the early days of their engagement. "Well, Louis, what now?" was the inquiry, as with some *empressement* he entered the room, after a hasty knock and without waiting for permission to walk in.

"I have news for you, girls," he said, flinging himself down on the sofa, to the discomfiture of Alice, whose pretty muslin frills and needlework were crushed remorselessly.

"Oh, Louis! you are spoiling my lovely new *camisole*," she exclaimed, running to the rescue. "Suppose I sat down on your fine evening cravats, or on your best shirt—that one with the embroidered front, you know!" Louis, like all his countrymen, was a bit of a dandy, and the girls amused themselves with poking fun at him occasionally.

"It was only last week you sat down on Cynthia's bonnet!" said Flossie, reprovingly.

"He did worse than that three weeks ago," put in Irene; "he plumped down on my poor pussy and her kittens."

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" cried Louis, springing up. "I am the most unlucky individual—I am always spoiling something; I only saw a heap of *white*, and I took it for a piece of calico."

"Calico, indeed!" they all exclaimed. "The finest, softest cambric, all tucked and trimmed, and finished off with Alice's own beautiful embroidery," added Irene.

"Men don't know calico from French cambric, nor coarsest serge from real cashmere," was Flossie's remark. While Alice observed that many of them were really colour-blind, since they classed all sorts of pinks and scarlets and magentas as simply red!

"Come, now," said Louis; "that's too much. I will engage to distinguish shades and tints better than any lady in Endlestone. You forget that I am a *dyer*, and that it is my trade to study the chemistry of colour."

"I wish you and papa would not call yourselves *dyers*," interrupted Florence; "you might find some other word, surely."

"Why should we? Why should we not call ourselves what we are? I am not ashamed of my calling, nor is Mr. Arnison; in fact, we are both rather proud of it. A man who is ashamed of his trade had better give it up; but I don't see why one should be ashamed of any honest avocation at which one works honestly, and with all one's heart. I am quite content to be dyer in Endlestone, and *teinturier* in France."

"You might call yourselves art-chemists," suggested Florence; "dyers has such a vulgar sound."

"There are dyers and dyers, *mademoiselle*. Now let me tell you a little tale—a pretty little story which was told to me by a friend of yours, Alice—your future sister-in-law, Mrs. Lawley. She knew, some few years ago, several young ladies whose papa was making a fine fortune out of artificial manures; she went to school with them, and they always spoke of their father as an '*agricultural chemist*.' Your *art chemist*, Flossie, made me think of it. The young ladies did not like it to be known that their parent made and sold such a nasty, vulgar commodity; and certainly it is a nasty trade, offensive to the nostrils, and more unsavoury, I think, than a soap-boiler's or a tanner's; but still, when all is said and done, it is a perfectly reputable, and, if well managed, an extremely remunerative trade, such as no sensible man need be ashamed of. The man himself was not ashamed, but his daughters were. He respected the unpleasant stuff which turned him in a handsome fortune, and which had enabled him to educate his girls expensively, and allow them every advantage. He had also built himself a fine roomy house a little way out of London, and one evening Mrs. Lawley—then Katie Goodman—was taking a walk with one of the daughters of the agricultural chemist, not very far from home—so near, indeed, that the windows, glittering in the sunset, and the turrets of the castellated mansion, were very prominent features in the landscape.

"They were overtaken by two men, who were discoursing loudly on the handsome appearance of the house in question; and one—evidently from the country—asked his companion to whom it belonged. The agricultural chemist was mentioned by name, and then came the

further and quite natural inquiry, ‘What is he?’ ‘Why, don’t yer know?’ was the answer; ‘I thought all the world knew *him*! He is the great *muck-maker*, and he’s got all his money out o’ muck. His works are down Bermondsey way, and they makes a lot of stink, I’ve heard; but what’s a stink if it makes money!’ The ladies hurried on, having heard enough. And Katie’s friend said to her, ‘I’ll never call things by fine names again; henceforth I shall say that my father is a *manufacturer* of artificial manure.’

“Now, Flossie, the tale tells its own moral, for you may call your father what you please, but I won’t call myself anything but a dyer—lest I hear myself called something infinitely worse.”

Florence, it must be remarked, was so foolish as to be ashamed of being a tradesman’s daughter, and she tried hard to convince herself that her father carried on, not a business, but a *profession*!

It was a curious fact that Florence was the only one of the family given to snobbishness. She took care that every one should know that her mother was a Capel, and she refused to acknowledge her connection with dye-houses and vats, whenever she could do so with impunity. Louis often took upon himself to rate her severely, and she bore from him what certainly she would not have endured from any one of her own family, saving always her father, with whom she never ventured to discuss the subject—though once or twice he had heard her say rather foolish things, which he had not failed to notice. Her sisters held that she had learned her silly notions from some friends of hers at York, where she occasionally visited.

“Well! Is no one curious to hear the news? I came from the counting-house on purpose to bring it,” said Louis, pretending to feel injured, as the four girls went steadily on with their sewing, without asking a single question.

“I declare I forgot all about the news,” replied Alice; “and it was very much your own fault, Louis, diverting our attention so entirely. But, now, what is it?”

“Guess! I give you each three guesses.”

“Your mother and father are both coming to the wed-

ding?" questioned Florence. "The member for the county is dead!" "You have discovered a new colour!" "We are going to have a curate!" "Papa has bought the Merridene estate, after all!" and twenty other conjectures were spoken, at all of which Louis gravely shook his head.

"You must tell us; we give up," said Alice, at last. "Come, now, Louis, don't keep us in suspense. News—real news—that is not mere gossip, is so rare at Endlestone, that I am sure we ought not to be kept out of it an hour longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Well, the Bradens are coming home—they will be here for Easter."

"Is that certain? Some one said they would be back at Christmas."

"It is quite certain. Madame Arnison has just had a letter from Miladi. She came into the counting-house to tell your father, and as I perceived she had something else to say to him, I proposed to run into the house, and convey the tidings to the young ladies. *Et me voici!*"

"How stupid of us not to think of the Bradens!" exclaimed Florence. "The fact is, we have been disappointed so often that we had almost left off thinking of their return. Oh, I am so glad! Now we shall have some society again, without travelling to York to find it."

"I never knew that we had been without society all this time," laughed Irene. "However, I am very glad the Bradens are coming back. Are they in England now?"

"I did not hear. All I can tell you is, that they are due at Bradenshope for Easter. I think Mrs. Arnison said something about driving over. Well, now I must be going back; Monsieur and Madame must have had their private talk out by this time. Ah, and here is yesterday's *Times*—no, the day before yesterday's. I shall not have leisure to look at it for ever so long. I am just ready to try a new *formula*. So perhaps you will like to look it over, young ladies. You can skip the politics, and read the Court news, the murders, and the marriages in high life. The *Times* is so stupid; it does not give the latest fashions, I am afraid."

Florence was the one to catch the newspaper, as Louis tossed it into the group and withdrew. She put down her work and began to read bits of news here and there, as they caught her eye; and presently she cried, "Oh, there is a *marriage in high life*, really! A Miss Poinsett, daughter of the Right Honourable Colonel Poinsett; do you know her, Hilda?"

"Yes, very well. She came out the year before last, and people made quite a fuss with her. She was very pretty—a gentle, fair kind of prettiness; something in your style, Irene. She had a fortune, too. People said of her that she was 'such a sweet girl!' But who is the bridegroom, Flossie?"

"Let me see! in looking at the account of the dresses, I forgot the bridegroom, who is really a person of very little consequence."

"Except that the wedding could not take place at all without him," interrupted Alice, rather resentfully. "I hope you will count John for *somebody* on *our* wedding-day!"

"We will make much of John, don't fear," laughed Irene; "I am very fond of John, and mean to call him 'brother' as soon as ever we come home from church; though, of course, *you* will be the first personage, Alice! —a bride is always first on her wedding-day, you know. But all this time we don't know who was the bridegroom of Miss Poinsett. Now, Flossie!"

"She was married at St. George's, Hanover Square—the fashionable church for weddings, isn't it, Hilda?—and the bridegroom was—let me see—a son of the Earl of Camelford——"

She was stopped by a sort of sob, and by the apparition of Hilda lying back in her chair, gasping for breath and deadly pale. Irene was the only one who understood, because the other sisters had never been told the name and lineage of Hilda's faithless suitor. Irene did not doubt that Horace Trelawny had taken to himself a wife.

"What is it?" cried Flossie, frightened. Alice, at once divining the truth, looked tenderly at poor Hilda, on whom the blow had so unexpectedly descended. Irene ran to comfort her with loving words and caresses, and Florence

laid down the paper in utter consternation. "To think we have only just missed being nearly related to a peeress!" was her melancholy reflection. Alice ran to fetch some wine, and ere she returned Irene had possessed herself of the paper. She let Hilda drink the wine, and then she said, gently, "I think there is a mistake here. Miss Poinsett has married, not your *ci-devant* friend, Mr. Trelawny, but his brother."

"His brother would never marry. He is a confirmed invalid; he never leaves his room."

"Listen! 'Yesterday was solemnised, at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, the marriage of Richard, Viscount Polperro, eldest son of the Earl of Camelford, to Violet Mary, only daughter of the Hon. Colonel Sir Thomas Poinsett, K.C.B.' It is Lord Polperro, without doubt, who is married. Mr. Trelawny is not mentioned, though some of the Trelawnys—cousins of the bridegroom—are named as bridesmaids. And there is all about the dresses and the *déjeuner*."

"Let me see!" cried Hilda, holding the paper in both her hands. "Yes; I believe you are right; but last year Lord Polperro's marriage seemed about as probable as little Jacky's. He was very ill, had been a long time confined to his couch, and the doctors declared him to be slowly dying. I am sure Horace—Mr. Trelawny, I mean—never for a moment doubted his speedy succession to the title and estates of his elder brother. And now he is married!"

"Will not Mr. Trelawny's prospects be strangely altered?" asked Alice gravely.

"Very much so, I am afraid. He had always been taught to look upon himself as the future Earl. As the heir of Camelford he was welcomed in many circles. It will be a terrible downfall for him."

"Serve him right, for calculating on his brother's death!" observed Florence. "I hope Lord Polperro will have half-a-dozen stalwart sons."

"One puny baby will suffice to keep him Mr. Trelawny to his life's end," said Alice, as if she were pleased to announce the fact. The girls knew the circumstance of their cousin's cruel treatment, but no names had been

mentioned in their presence ; only Irene knew, from Hilda herself, that Horace Trelawny was the man. Hilda gradually recovered her composure ; and presently, when she and Irene were shut up in the bedroom, which they shared together, preparing for their early dinner, Hilda said, " I am so ashamed of myself. How weak, how missish you must think me ! "

" I did not think you weak at all, except physically. You know you are nothing like strong yet, and it certainly was a startling piece of news to fall upon your ears so suddenly. But tell me, dear, do you really care so much for that young man still ? "

" I thought I did not ; I fancied he had lost his hold of me entirely and for ever. And that to a great extent I have ceased to care for him, I am positive ; nor do I think anything could restore him to a place in my affections. Well, perhaps that is saying too much, for I shall never think of him as an indifferent person, and it would grieve me if I heard of his being in any trouble ; but I would not marry him for all the earldoms in the world—and what is more, I would not be his wife if he came to me begging and entreating to be taken back into his old place as my affianced lover. No, Irene ; I am sure I do not love him—nay ! I am almost sure I *never* loved him."

" And yet you thought you did ? "

" And in a certain way I did ! But it must have been more fancy than love. I was captivated, fascinated, charmed with Horace's devotion. I think a girl is often caught in that way ; she believes she loves for life, when after all she does not really love, but only likes. It is well if this discovery is not made too late. Irene, I thank God that I am not now Horace Trelawny's wife, for if I loved at all it was the ideal, not the actual Horace, who was so dear to me. The true Horace I could never esteem, never reverence ; and I can think of no fate more pitiable, more utterly wretched, than to be wedded to one whom you do not and cannot thoroughly respect. Oh ! it must be terrible—terrible ! "

" I think so, too. After all, Hilda, must not true love, the *only* love which is abiding, be founded on reverence and esteem ? There is a good deal of so-called love,

which is not love at all, I am sure; I don't know what it is, though."

"Partly gratified vanity, I should say. A girl is grateful to the man who prefers her to all others, she is pleased, flattered—and then there is the *éclat* of an engagement! But, oh, Irene! such love, or fancy rather, can never lead to a true and holy marriage, such as God approves. It is only lately that I have felt this—that love which so many, even good, people think a subject for a jest, is the most sacred thing in this mortal life of ours. It seems to me now as wrong to make jokes about love and marriage as about religion."

"Mamma has always taught us that it is so. I never knew her so angry with any of us as she was once—just two years ago—with Flossie, for teasing Alice about John Goodman. I never heard mamma speak so strongly, I think. She said that to treat love as a jest was wicked, and coarse, and senseless; and that a woman who turned it into ridicule was herself quite unworthy of being loved by any good and noble-minded man. The real thing, mamma says, is altogether beautiful and heavenly, while its semblance is of the earth earthy, and can never last for life. And I don't think mamma is romantic, Hilda; on the contrary, she is eminently practical, as I think you must have found out for yourself."

"I found it out long ago! Irene, what a blessing it must be to have a wise and tender mother, who, out of the depths of her own experiences, can instruct her daughters, and show them the right way from the wrong. Such a mother as yours is, indeed, above price."

"Ah! and she is such a good wife, too! It is not only that papa says so, but that we, the grown-up girls, can see it for ourselves. I have heard of women who sink the wife in the mother. Mamma never does; papa is always *first* with her, as I am convinced he, as her husband, ought to be."

"Then, too, Irene, he is a pattern husband. With how much respect he treats her! What numberless little lover-like attentions he still pays her! And I should fancy he keeps nothing from her—she has his fullest confidence?"

"Mamma says it is altogether a woman's own fault if her husband keeps anything secret from her. And I can quite believe it. Nothing proves so fully that she is an unfit wife, not a help-meet for a man, as the fact that she has not her husband's confidence. Of course, I am supposing the husband to be a good Christian man—for bad men would naturally keep their bad ways from a pure-minded woman."

"It seems to me that it is a dreadful risk to marry a man who is *not* a Christian person. True goodness, which can only come from an earnest desire to obey God's laws, must be the sole safeguard as to love and marriage. Horace was a mere gay man of the world, who did not even acknowledge any law save that of self-interest and self-pleasure—but, then, in those days I was no better. We were not ill-matched. Yet I do thank God who saved me from a fate ten times worse than that which has befallen me. I begin to perceive that afflictions are only blessings in disguise. If I had kept my position in the world, if the bubble of my supposed heiress-ship had not collapsed, I might at this moment have been a miserable, forlorn woman, just waking up to the terrible conviction that I had been wooed and married not for my own sake, but for my paltry money."

"You would have been an ordinary fashionable couple, I expect."

"Probably; but that sort of life would never have really satisfied me. There would have been a void—an aching sense of something missing—a longing for a higher and better life. I might have found the truth after long groping for it, for God can touch all hearts, and He can and does work out His will everywhere. Nevertheless, I am glad that I was not left to my own self-will and supineness. I do feel, Irene, that God Himself brought me here, and that He has spared my life that I may dedicate it to Him and serve Him truly and willingly all my days."

"I am so glad, dear. I do wish you could stay on here with us. The Grey House is so very dull."

"And yet I think my duty lies there, for it was there my steps were directed. I believe I *ought* to go back; it

will prove that I am in earnest, that my Christian profession is not a mere sentiment, or make-belief, if I try to do what is right, simply for right's own sake—which is the same thing as saying ‘for Christ's sake,’ for even He, you know, pleased not Himself.”

“I believe you are right, dear, and I will not say another word to dissuade you. There is the dinner-bell.”

While they were at table, Mrs. Arnison said: “Louis told you I had heard from Lady Braden, and that they are coming home next week. She wants me to go, as soon as I can make it convenient, to Bradenshope, on a little business for her; and as it is so fine a day, I think I had better drive over at once. We will have the waggonette, so that several of us can go. I should like Hilda and Irene, Lily and Rose, to accompany me. Hilda has never seen Bradenshope, and the twins will be leaving us for awhile very soon, and Irene must go to take care of Hilda. We will carry plenty of wraps, and we need not be late. You must drive us, Louis, for papa has an appointment this afternoon. The carriage is ordered for three o'clock.”

CHAPTER XVII.

GHOSTS.

“There are more guests at table than the hosts
Invited; the illuminated hall
Is thronged with quiet, inoffensive ghosts,
As silent as the pictures on the wall.

“The spirit world around this world of sense
Floats like an atmosphere, and everywhere
Wafts through these earthly mists and vapours dense
A vital breath of more ethereal air.”

“WILL not this marriage completely alter Horace Treawny's position?” was the question Hilda asked of herself from time to time, as with her aunt and cousins she

drove through the green budding Endlestone lanes, and over the breezy, hill-girdled moor, to beautiful Bradenshope. "It is just a year since I began to think of him as more than an ordinary friend, and to fancy he cared for me," she thought; "and oh! what changes have taken place since then! Am I, indeed, the Hilda Capel of last April—the spoiled, *fêtéed*, flattered, frivolous *belle* of the season, whose only aim in life was to shine in the fashionable world, to enjoy the passing hour, to please and gratify herself? It is a new life that has come to me since last summer; I can call it nothing less. But Horace—how will he bear this change in his prospects? for utterly changed they must be. I remember him telling me how lucky it was for him that he was in point of fact an eldest son, since poor Polperro was certain never to marry, and was not at all likely to survive his father. And Aunt Mowbray, too—I recollect her saying to me, 'You know, my dear, if it were not for his elder brother's infirmities, and probable early demise, Horace Trelawny would be no match for you!' I wonder how it all came about? I wonder if Mary Sandys knows the story?"

Irene guessed what it was that so occupied her cousin's mind, and left her undisturbed, till, turning suddenly into a broad avenue of lordly limes, Hilda roused herself, and asked if this was Bradenshope.

"Yes," said Rose; "but we have a good way yet to go before we see the house; it lies quite on the other side of the park."

And the park was of immense extent, and so beautiful that Hilda forgot all about the "Marriage in High Life" which had so disturbed and perplexed her, in contemplating its wondrous loveliness. It was one of those parks which are not often found in England out of the northern counties; a park which seemed to include all the features of the district—rivers, fells, ancient woods, pine-clad slopes, waterfalls, grey rocks, deep, humid, ferny vales, and broad stretches of lawnlike pasture, about which roamed herds of deer and many cattle. Bradenshope was famed for its rare breed of pure white oxen, and for some foreign kinds of sheep, and Lady Braden's dairy was said to be the pride of all the county.

"Oh! what lovely creatures!" cried Hilda, as they passed the mild-eyed oxen, clustered under a great clump of budding chestnuts; "and really those cows yonder are fit for a cattle show! What curious sheep!"

"They are *alpacas*," said Mrs. Arnison—"a very peculiar breed from South America; there are not many like them in this country."

"They are more peculiar than handsome, I think."

"Wait till you see the horned sheep!—large flocks of them feed on the other side of the park. They are really *pretty muttons*," said Louis, who was pleased with Hilda's appreciation of the place. The young Frenchman was fast becoming naturalised at Endlestone, and already experienced a certain *amour-propre* in the advantages of the wild and beautiful north country. He evidently felt quite a property in the beauties of Bradenshawe.

Presently, after passing through a wood, the house came in sight—a fine old mansion rather irregularly built, chiefly in the Tudor style. Already there were signs of preparation for the family; men were at work in the shrubberies and parterres, shutters were thrown back, and windows wide open; a tradesman's cart rattled by them towards the servants' entrance, and at the great hall door stood the stately housekeeper herself, overlooking several women who were busy weeding the gravel walks.

"Ah! there is Mrs. Maxwell," said Mrs. Arnison. "I wonder if she expected us?"

Mrs. Maxwell had received orders "to expect" Mrs. Arnison. "I had a letter from my lady this morning," she said, as she assisted her visitor to alight, "and I felt sure, as it was such a fine afternoon, you would drive out at once, and bring some of your young ladies with you. So I ordered tea in the blue drawing-room. As you may imagine, ma'am, we are all terribly busy; it is such short notice. But there—I've kept things in good order all along, for I always had a kind of presentiment that when they did come back it would be all in a hurry."

"I, too, received a letter this morning from Lady Braden," returned Mrs. Arnison, "and that is why I am here. There are some things she wished me to mention to you; she did not say exactly what—she only hinted;

but I could *guess*. She could not bring herself to say them, poor dear—not even to write them. And she and I had one good talk before they went away."

"I am glad of it, ma'am; I never felt so puzzled how to make the exact preparations that were needed. For, of course, I know there must be alterations; and as for those rooms, no one has entered them, and I keep the key. And yet, Mrs. Arnison"—lowering her voice so much that both Hilda and Irene turned away, fearing to intrude on confidences—"yet, ma'am, there are sounds heard in those chambers! And the girls tell some strange stories about the north wing, only I am not supposed to know aught about them. But there's not much goes on at Bradens-hope that I don't hear, somehow or other; only it's prudent on occasion to hear and see and *say nothing*. Would you be pleased to come to my room, Mrs. Arnison? the young ladies won't mind being left to themselves a little, I dare say."

"Just what I wanted," exclaimed Hilda, when her aunt and Mrs. Maxwell were fairly out of hearing. "What a splendid old place—quite a palace for size, and a castle for antiquity! And there must be nice mouldy corners and haunted rooms and awful corridors! It makes me think of the Castle of Udolpho; it has such a flavour of ghosts about it!"

"Ghosts enough," replied Irene, gravely and sadly.

"Not really?" cried Hilda, with a shudder. "Of course, I was only in fun; I don't exactly believe in ghosts, nor yet quite disbelieve in them. I should be frightened out of my senses if I saw a veritable ghost, I dare say; and yet I delight in good old ghost stories and family legends. And there *are* ghosts here—I am certain!"

"There are ghosts everywhere, I am afraid. You know the old saying that there is a skeleton in every house? Well, surely there are ghosts in the memories of all people who are past their youth."

"You are right, and though I am only nineteen next month, I have my own ghosts, that go with me where I go, and haunt me at bed and board. But you, Irene!—you are certainly free from those ghosts?"

"Thank God, yes! except when I come here; I think the Blue House is as free of ghosts as any dwelling-place in Christendom. And yet, I can see how, as we grow older, there must come to most of us the spectres of the past—some sad and sweet, some sad and dreadful. God grant that to us may never come accusing spirits!"

"Ah! but, Irene, I was not thinking of that sort of ghost. Is there not a ghost-chamber in this house?"

"Oh, yes, and if you will come with me, I will show it you—that is, if it is not locked up. If it is, I will ask Mrs. Maxwell presently for the key. There is a whole suite of rooms that enjoy a bad character, and most of them are never used, and, indeed, are falling to decay—which, no doubt, accounts for their evil reputation. When human creatures desert a place, rats, mice, bats, owls, and other fallow deer are sure to take up their quarters, and there are always plenty of people to turn the scrimmage they are certain to make to supernatural account. Come this way."

"Where are Lily and Rose?"

"Gone off to the gardens, probably. We will go there another day. We have only time for the house, and but for a very small portion of that. Shall we take the haunted rooms?"

"Certainly! I shall fancy myself 'Emily' in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho,' and you Dorothy, the faithful house-keeper. Only, to do the thing properly, it ought to be on the stroke of midnight, and we should carry lamps or tapers warranted to go out at the first intimation of the ghost's approach. In those old romances, haunted chambers were always explored in the dead of night, when all the household, save the adventurous visitor, was wrapped in balmy slumbers. What a curious old door!"

"Yes, this part of the building is much more venerable than any other. See how thick the walls are, and how ponderous the oaken beams. Here commences the suite of rooms which are supposed to be the habitat of supernatural beings. But this room is the one commonly called 'The Haunted Chamber,' though, properly speaking, it is the tapestry room."

"It is never used, I suppose?"

"I know people have slept in it of late years. In spite of its low ceiling, it is a handsome and comfortable room, you perceive, and when the house is very full it seems a pity to be making up beds while this one is in readiness. When Mary Braden—Mrs. Crosbie, you know—was married three years ago, and the house, large as it is, was crowded with the wedding-guests, Philip Harwood and another young man volunteered to sleep here, in order to give up their rooms to some ladies, who arrived rather unexpectedly."

"Well! and were they disturbed?"

"Not in the least; though Philip complained of the impudence of a rat that ran over him just as it was getting light. Still, the room is not liked; and I do not think any one has occupied it since."

"Rats are almost as unpleasant as ghosts. And the room is certainly gloomy, Irene; I should not care to be its inhabitant. One might so easily become nervous, and excited imagination might soon play tricks. It would be quite easy to fancy those figures on the tapestry moving, in any dim and flickering light, or the drapery rustling, or a shadow gliding across the surface of that ancient Venetian mirror. And then the wind would help the illusion; it would get under the tapestry on a stormy night—and hark! even now it moans in that wide chimney. Seriously, Irene, do you believe at all in ghosts?"

"Yes, and no. I do not believe in spectres terrifying people out of their senses; the good Lord would never permit His children to be scared and tormented to no good purpose. I would not say there has *never* been such a thing as an apparition; I could not feel positive that no disembodied spirit has ever taken shape and form, and returned for some brief interval to earth. We know nothing—literally nothing—of spirits after they have once passed the mysterious threshold of the other world."

"Spiritualists—so-called—would tell us they know a great deal, and know it positively. *Séances* are quite the fashion in town, I assure you."

"My dear, when I hear or read about those *séances*, I lose my patience altogether; and I think if I had lost any one very dear to me, I should loathe the alleged spiritual-

istic manifestations far more than I do now. The spirits—if spirits they be—who come to these *séances* are vulgar, absurd, and sometimes malignant. I should, indeed, dread death if I could for a moment believe that I should become one of those disreputable beings who are credited with playing such pranks as no sober-minded, well-bred person would condescend to on earth. Fancy the great and holy dead—rather, I should say, the *departed*—returning to this world in order to play tricks; to hit disbelievers on the shins, to rap the knuckles of incredulous inquirers, to lift up tables and pianos, to play on violins, to move and ring dinner-bells—just what a mischievous schoolboy would delight in."

"The worst part of it seems, to my mind, the pretended communications from the spiritual world. The spirits all appear to have deteriorated so fearfully since their passing out of the body; they speak bad English, they spell incorrectly, they write illegibly, and they tell the dupes who listen to them nothing which they could not discover for themselves. The messages, which purport to come from another world, are trivial, puerile, and purposeless. At least, nothing of any importance is ever reported to the public, and I think the spiritualists would be glad enough to be able to give, on undeniable authority, revelations such as might indeed proceed from the awful spirit world. There may be, I think, a mystic mingling of spirit *with* spirit; but in such case no *mediums* are wanted."

"Depend upon it, there is a true and a false spiritualism, and the true, as you say, needs no mortal medium. While these *mediums*—or *media*, would they be called?—exist and claim to be the sole means of communication between this world and the world unseen, I shall never be a convert to modern spiritualism."

"Nor I, either. Yet, Irene, there are many very strange things which are inexplicable to us."

"Or they appear so. Do you know, when Alice and I were at York, we met with a whole circle of the people who call themselves *spiritualists*—as if they only believed in spirit!—and we heard so much, and were so constantly addressed, even persecuted, on the subject, that

we became very uncomfortable, and almost unhappy. This so-called spiritualism seemed to take from the life to come—the life which every one *must* enter upon, sooner or later—all its dignity and beauty, and all its sweetness, and most certainly all its joy. As I thought of what I had heard, my faith in God seemed to waver, my hope in Christ grew dim; I was no longer on the Rock, but among the quicksands, and I could say with the Psalmist—‘the fear of death is fallen upon me.’”

“But it did not last?”

“Oh, no! though it was some time before I lost the impressions I received—impressions, mind! which I am sure were given in all good faith by those from whom they came. Don’t suppose that all ‘spiritualists’ are impostors; far from it. I have talked with those who would not, for all this world could give, willingly deceive. After I came home I spoke to papa, and we had one of our good quiet talks about spiritualism, and he set me right.”

“Can you tell me what he said?”

“I can tell you the substance of it. He, too, believes that so-called spiritualism is not all imposture, much less conscious imposture; he feels sure that wonders may be, and doubtless are, produced by *natural forces*, of which we as yet know little or nothing, just as past generations knew nothing of electricity or of steam power; for instance, magnetism and animal magnetism, and the Odylic, or Odic, or Psychic forces; and that in every age of the world infant science has been made the instrument of superstition and of trickery. And some of these people, papa thinks, are playing with these hidden and undeveloped forces just as a child or a mischievous person might play with the electric telegraph. And to these forces, and in no wise to *spirits*, does he attribute the phenomena produced, when, as is too often the case, they are *not mere humbug*.”

“That seems sensible enough, and it reconciles one to some of the phenomena in question. The idea of spirits, disembodied spirits—gone, as we hope and trust, to be for ever with the Lord—occupying themselves in slapping and rapping living people or inanimate objects *in the dark*,

is, I think, most shocking, and perfectly repulsive to a reverential and religious mind. It makes the life to come smaller and meaner than the life that now is. I almost think I prefer the orthodox ghost of olden time, who never troubled himself about a medium, but came *in propria persona*, and straightway scared the unlucky ghost-seer out of his senses. At any rate, such a ghost was more to be respected."

"And far less to be dreaded."

"Far less; for the ancient ghost—if ever there was one—was seldom, if ever, mischievous. But, beyond that, we know that God is Lord of the spiritual as of the material world, and we are sure He keeps in peace and safety all who trust in Him. Is it not written, 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee'? Are not the darkness and the light both alike to Him? Why—covered with *His* wings, and under His shield and buckler—should we fear either 'the terror by night,' or the arrow that fieth by day? Even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, need we fear any evil? Neither things seen, nor unseen, nor principalities, nor powers, should affright those to whom the Lord is indeed a light and a salvation."

"I must confess to having been a most nervous and imaginative child, and I am by no means a strong-minded woman. But of this I am sure—trust in God will give one strength and repose when all philosophic arguments are in vain. Philosophy is excellent. Christians should never undervalue it any more than science; but the grandest and best of all kinds of philosophy must be that which bids the soul have perfect faith in God and in His love, which will never permit His children to be really harmed by any powers of darkness or of light. And now, don't you want to know the legend of this room?"

"To be sure I do. But is there time to tell it? We might have talked about spiritualism—or whatever it ought to be called—at home! I do think, Irene, you and I have a terrible habit of falling into discursive conversations."

"I am afraid we have, though I am not quite sure there is anything really undesirable in the habit. Besides,

spiritualism came naturally, *à propos* of ghosts, and ghosts are inseparably connected with haunted chambers."

"But the legend of the Braden ghost?"

"There really is not time now to tell it with effect, and I think I ought to leave the full relation to Walter. I may just say that a horrible murder was undoubtedly committed in this very room nearly two hundred years ago, and that in that black cabinet yonder, in a secret drawer, were discovered, only half a century back, papers which gave a full account of the awful crime, and of the circumstances under which it was committed."

"Was the murderer a Braden?"

"Yes, an ancestress of the present family; her picture still hangs in the great gallery which I will show you presently. If I were the head of the house of Braden, I think I would have it removed. Sir Paul, the father of the present baronet, did intend, I am told, to have it consigned to obscurity; but when it came to the point, he hesitated, and, finally, refused to give the order. There was something about a dream he had—a dream communicated to no one but his eldest son. So the portrait is still in its place among the knights and dames of Bradens-hope to this day."

They went on through the other rooms—dressing-closet, boudoir, antechamber, and oratory, all communicating with each other, and all, except the oratory, opening upon the corridor, which ran the length of the whole wing. Only the bedroom and dressing-closet were in anything like habitable order; from the boudoir, all the furniture, save a very old and nearly stringless spinet, had been removed; the antechamber was entirely empty, and the oratory was filled with long-untouched and dusty lumber.

"If I were lady of Bradenshope," said Hilda, "I would certainly have all these rooms cleared out, and, as far as might be, modernised. The tapestry is interesting, of course, but it is all to pieces, and must be a fine habitation for moth and spiders; I would present it to some museum. I would have the ivy cut away from the windows; I would burn that ebony cabinet, which has, positively, a wicked look; and I would——"

But all else Hilda would have done no one ever knew,

for the girls were startled by a sound in the corridor without. A tread—not a ghostly tread—was heard,—unless, indeed, the phantom were disporting himself in fashionable nineteenth-century boots; and both Hilda and Irene were certain it was not the footstep of Louis Michaud, who had gone off to the stables instead of entering the house with them.

"Who is this plotting treason against our household gods?" cried a voice close at hand. "Burn the cabinet, indeed! Why it was presented to a very wicked ancestor of ours, by that most virtuous and delightful of women, *Catherine de Medicis!* I hope you are quite well, Miss Irene Arnison!"

"Walter!—Mr. Braden!" cried Irene, astonished, and a little confused at the familiar way in which she had accosted him.

"Walter always, if you please! If you knew how it pains me to hear myself called 'Mr. Braden!'" replied the young man gravely. "I must be Mr. Braden to the world generally, I suppose; but let me be 'Walter' still to my old friends. I have just seen old Diggs, and he shouted, 'Master Walter! Master Walter!' as if I were as deaf as himself; but it did me good to hear the name that seems really to belong to me. And who is this young lady—not an Arnison, surely?"

"No, she is my cousin—Hilda Capel; she lives with Aunt Dorothy, at the Grey House, but she has been staying with us since the winter. Hilda, let me present to you Mr. Walter Braden, of Bradenshope. But, Walter, where did you spring from?"

"I was in London last night; and wishing for several reasons to be at home before the rest of the family arrived, I started early this morning. I have seen Mrs. Arnison and Mrs. Maxwell, and I caught a glimpse of Lily and Rose, feeding the peafowl in the Pleasaunce; then I came in search of you. I fancied it was Alice who was with you—Mrs. Arnison only spoke of you as 'the girls.' She was deep in counsel with Mrs. Maxwell."

"And when do the others arrive?"

"Next Wednesday or Thursday; and Mary and her husband with them, for a month's visit. Miss Capel, you

and I must have a little serious conversation. *What are you going to do with our family heirlooms?*"

Hilda blushed scarlet, and was too confused to make any kind of rejoinder. She could not forget that she had prefaced her foolish speech by supposing herself lady of Bradenshope, while the heir of Bradenshope was actually within hearing! She could only hope he had not caught the first sentence, and resolved never again to chatter nonsense in a strange house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

W A R N I N G V O I C E S .

"Coming events cast their shadows before."

LET us, for a little while, return to a person, for whom, however, we have no great admiration—I mean Horace Trelawny, who, if the printed announcement of his brother's marriage be true, has no longer a prospective coronet to offer to the lady of his choice.

Of course it was true! How could it be otherwise? When the *Times*, or any other of its established contemporaries, announces "A Marriage in High Life," celebrated at St. George's, Hanover Square, and gives a good report of the bride's and bridesmaids' dresses, and disclosed the retreat where the happy pair are supposed to be blissfully honeymooning, it is certainly *un fait accompli*. Hilda never doubted the truth of the announcement, but she greatly wondered, as we have seen, *how it all happened*. She wrote to Mary Sandys, but that young lady could not give particulars; she had spent the winter in Italy with an invalid aunt, and had heard nothing whatever of the match till Hilda's letter of inquiry reached her. Let us, who in virtue of our

authorship are favoured with powers of *clairvoyance*, beyond that of any accredited medium, see how it came to pass.

We left Horace Trelawny wandering about on the wet evening of a wet, miserable day, in the dreary, deserted roads of Hyde Park, saying to himself, "Poor Hilda!" Pitying her certainly; for had she not been disappointed of his invaluable self? Had she not lost a lover who would have been a prize to any girl? But he pitied himself much more, for he had been disappointed of—he knew not how many thousands of pounds; Major Capel was reported to be so enormously rich—and he had certainly lost a very charming wife, who would in due time have been a very graceful and effective Countess of Camelford. So after cursing the memory of the unfortunate Major, and feeling himself a little "like a brute," as he recalled that grave farewell, that last solemn kiss, those sweet, sad, proud eyes, dark with unshed tears, he determined to go home and dine, and, if possible, drown his sorrows in a bottle of sparkling Burgundy.

This, however, was not quite so easy as he had hoped it might be; either his appetite was bad, or the dinner was a failure—and yet the Club was noted for its dainty little dinners, and its world-renowned *chef*! Nor did the wine please him, and though he drank a great deal more than was good for him, it had not the ardently desired effect. Should he go to the theatre, to the opera? should he join certain friends of his at the billiard table? or should he take a turn at roulette, or rouge et noir, and lose in excitement the cares that were not dissipated by the fumes of wine?

"No, I can't; I am tired, dead tired," he said to himself, as he threw down the newspaper, of which he had not read a single word. "I feel very queer, too; no wonder! It was a dreadful trial to me, facing that poor girl, and putting an end to—to what I suppose I ought to call our engagement. Well! it was her own act! She said it out quite plainly—'I give you back your freedom! Henceforth we are strangers!' And, by Jove, how handsome she looked! Every inch a queen! There are many girls of more unquestionable beauty, but this girl is worthy of a coronet; she is fit to be a duchess! Poor,

darling Hilda ! and I am sure she loved me devotedly. I could see it in her eyes, and hear it in her voice, proudly as she looked, and calmly as she spoke those parting words. I shall never find another girl to suit me so exactly. *But!*—what else could I do ? I can no more afford to marry a dowerless bride than to buy up all the railways. A man must live, and live as becomes his station, and I'm hard-up, very hard-up, I am afraid ! I wonder, now, how much I do owe ! how many thousands ! Won't the governor be enraged when he finds this match is not to be, and that the heiress was a myth ? And I must screw a few hundreds out of him, just to go on with ; I must throw a sop to Cerberus, in the shape of part-payment to one or two of my creditors. Heigho ! Care killed a cat, but it sha'n't kill me. I'm the same Horace Trelawny as ever, with only two lives—an old life, and a life that the most sanguine insurance company would never take at any premium—between me and the Earldom of Camelford. There are gold fish in the sea yet, and willing to be caught ; I must look out for a City heiress, if I can't find one of my own order. I *must* marry money ! Heaven knows if I had been a *millionaire*, and without debts, I'd never have thrown over my sweet Hilda, though it would have been extremely awkward to have for one's father-in-law a noted blackleg, who shot himself because he was afraid of the *travaux forcés*. I must go in for a second Miss Kilmansegg—a girl of that sort always falls madly in love with a coronet. If I had not been as good as an eldest son, I should never have got so far without a regular catastrophe ; I must say I have enjoyed extraordinary credit, but I'm afraid I am about come to the end of my tether."

It soon became known in the fashionable world that the match between the Honourable Mr. Trelawny and Miss Capel was not to be ; some said there never had been any engagement, others declared that it was very properly broken off, in consequence of the young lady's impecuniosity and the bad character of the late Major Capel. It was the close of the season, and Horace, not caring to be talked about at kettle-drums, nor discussed in after-dinner gossip, and generally disgusted with the state of affairs

around him, determined to go abroad. Why not try Monaco? He might have good luck there. "I'll go to bed," thought he, "and sleep upon it"—meaning, of course, the idea, and not the bed, which was his natural resting-place; and his plan answered so well that he dreamt the *croupier* was crying "*Rouge gagne! rouge gagne!*"—and that was his colour. And then he was trying to gather up the *rouleaux* of Napoleons and the notes that he had won, but there were so many, his hands would not hold them! He woke encouraged, then slept again, and dreamt a second time. Lo! he broke the bank! His fortune was made, and he forswore *le jeu* for ever and for ever. In the morning his mind was made up, he would go to Monaco as soon as he could make necessary arrangements.

And clearly the first thing to be done was to refill an exhausted purse! Though it was by no means so clear how this was to be accomplished. Lord Camelford was disgusted with his son's extravagance, but of late he had been more amiably disposed towards him, on account of the auriferous marriage he was about to contract. Hilda's fine fortune was to cover a multitude of her suitor's sins and peccadilloes! And now that was at an end—or rather, it had never been; the fortune had melted into thin air, as completely as any aerial castle in Spain; Hilda was far away—the farther the better, as things were; and the young man was more deeply in debt than he cared to acknowledge even to himself. Of course, his father knew, by this time, all about it; after all, he had never written to him, but he must have heard and read what a *fiasco* Hilda's splendid dowry had turned out to be; and he might think his son must require a little money from the paternal coffers, since he was disappointed of his bride. It was far more likely, however, that he would leave him to his own resources—simply continuing the "beggarly allowance," as Horace called it, which supplemented the very small income inherited from his mother. "An income!" said Mr. Trelawny, as he sat smoking one of his costliest *Havanas*, in a magnificent furred dressing-gown provided by his tailor—and to be paid for at some future time—"an income fit for a tutor, or a wretched curate, or a re-

tired country shopkeeper, or *anybody* who is accustomed to genteel poverty or vulgar respectability, but not an income for the future Earl of Camelford."

First of all, Horace tried the experiment of "raising the wind" in the fashion usually approved by spendthrifts, but no further loan could he obtain from Jew or Gentile, and some who held Mr. Trelawny's *note of hand* began to be extremely importunate. The tradesmen whom he had favoured with his custom began also to be, according to his showing, "insufferably impudent." That is to say, they were so utterly unreasonable as to require payment, or at least an instalment of payment, of their account, "as delivered," over and over again; and some whose "little bills" were of very long standing were absolutely clamorous. There had been whispers everywhere of Mr. Trelawny's good luck in picking up an heiress; but now that the season had come to an end, and there was no declaration of any engagement, these tradesmen, who were obliged to settle their own accounts regularly whether their customers paid or not, naturally concluded that they had been deceived, and that the heiress had never existed except in Mr. Trelawny's fertile imagination. And people, when they think they have been duped—especially such people as cannot be expected to maintain

"that repose
Which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere"—

are apt to be exceedingly angry, and threaten with uplifted voice. It was very unpleasant, certainly, and extremely aggravating, when only a few months before the persecuted young gentleman had fondly hoped that the days of his impecuniosity were at an end, and the years of plenty close at hand. And now he was dunned—*dunned* right and left worse than ever, and compelled to submit to all sorts of humiliations in the shape of expostulations, denunciations, and vulgar threats from infuriated creditors.

He tried his friends, but they were all "hard-up" themselves, and many of them were out of town, yachting, shooting, touring, and had not left their addresses; those who remained grew shy of him, and were evidently not anxious to enjoy his society. Even the man who had all

the season played Orestes to his Pylades gave him the cold shoulder, and that was the unkindest cut of all !

It was time to do something, though what sort of "something" Mr. Trelawny could not decide. The only person on whom he could at all rely was his *valet*, whose wages were regularly paid, and whose perquisites were never interfered with. Mr. Grimmett knew also that he could do certain things with impunity—things which would have procured his instant dismissal, "without a character," from any master who could afford to please himself—which Mr. Trelawny could not.

"What do you advise, Grimmett?" asked Horace, as he poked with his gold pencil-case among a heap of plebeian-looking blue envelopes, addressed in every variety of plebeian handwriting.

"What about, sir?" replied Grimmett, affecting polite unconsciousness of his master's extremity.

"What about? You know as well as I do, you rascal," returned the irate gentleman. "How am I to pay all these—these *confounded bills?*" And he gnashed his teeth, partly in rage, partly in sheer vexation, at his own miserable position. "And these are not all, by a long chalk, I can tell you; and there's that bill of Abrams', due on the twenty-second! And get out of town, out of this hateful country I must, or I shall go raving mad! Come, Grimmett, you are a clever fellow, and have helped me more than once; how shall I get some money—a lot of money—for a little won't serve my turn?"

"Really, sir," said Grimmett, with a virtuous expression of countenance, "that is a question which has perplexed wiser heads than yours or mine. They do say, sir, 'tis love that makes the world go round.' I think 'tis money. Money is power and money is happiness, though it's written in the Bible that it's 'a root of all evil.' Perhaps it was in those primitive days, when there couldn't have been any such thing as society; but now——"

"Hold your tongue! I didn't ask you to moralise or philosophise about money. Where shall I lay hands on at least a few cool hundreds, that's what I want to know!"

"And that, sir, I regret to be unable to tell you."

"Come, now, don't play the idiot! I say I want

money, and money I must have. It's a fact, man ! These wretches are baiting me as the dogs bait a bull. Impudent rogues ! After charging three times the value of their worthless goods, they clamour like beggars and bully like highwaymen ! ”

“ Very inconsiderate, indeed, sir; but you see, you can't teach that sort of person politeness. Tradesmen will be tradesmen—a poor, mean, vulgar, time-serving lot ! Of course, they've a heavy account to pay, or a bill to meet, the day after to-morrow.”

“ Some of them have, and I hope, with all my heart, they'll be at their wits' end to meet it. But some haven't even the grace to resort to that polite subterfuge. Here's a fellow—that *bric-à-brac* fool ! He all but says, ‘Stand and deliver.’ One can tackle two or three stinging insects, but what's a man to do when they buzz about him in a swarm, and an angry swarm, by Jove ? ”

“ You see, sir, they all were led to believe that you were about to make a most satisfactory alliance, and they made up their minds to put off the settling-day, so that you might not be incommoded. Now, the season is over; everybody is out of town ; there's no announcement, and naturally people are disappointed. They say they've been let in, and the rich marriage is *all smoke* ! Even ruder things than these I have heard some say.”

“ Let them say what they please. It's disagreeable, but impudence does not really hurt one. Still, the beggars must have *some* money, I suppose. I don't know that it is so *very* unreasonable of them to want ‘something on account,’ as one or two of the more modest of them phrase it. And I want some cash myself—I'm regularly stumped up, I tell you.”

“ I am very sorry, sir. Do you think Abrams couldn't, any way, be induced to do just another bill ? ”

“ I am afraid not. I'll try ! But he's ruination, you know. 'Pon my word, I didn't get more than £370 out of the last £500. I had to take the difference in vile Cape sherry and gutta-percha tubing. These usurers are worse than Shylock ; they want not only your very flesh and blood, but the skin of your teeth. Did you sound Ezra and Co. about the *post-obits* ? ”

"Well, yes, sir. But they didn't take kindly to the idea, nor did Solomon Wringer—who does a good deal in that way. You see, sir, when all is said and done, you are *not* Lord Polperro! Now, he could get any amount on *post-obit* bonds; but, then, he doesn't want it."

"Of course he doesn't want it! He wants nothing but gruel and physic, and his Persian cat and the last new novel. And he'll want less and less. It's absurd to put my brother in the road. It doesn't need to consult the College of Physicians to find out that he is dying. The last I heard about him he was dying fast."

"No doubt, sir—poor young gentleman! But you see, while he lives—while he's got a spark of life in him—you are not next heir! And while there's life there's hope; and a creaky gate hangs the longest."

"Not always! But we are no nearer the point than when we began this extremely interesting conversation. Come, Grimmett! I know you can help me, if you will. You've always just happened to hear of money going a-begging, on good security."

"That's it, sir; where *is* the good security? Show me that, and I'll engage to get you any sum you need by this time to-morrow. And yet—it's a curious coincidence—I do know of a chap who wants to put out a few hundreds at *good* interest; but of course he'd be very particular how he did it. He wouldn't risk his money."

"Ah, I thought you must know of somebody; just go and see him, and find out what can be done. I want fifteen hundred by to-morrow night, and a couple of thousands in ——."

But Grimmett lifted up his eyes and hands in horror, and intimated that so large a sum could in no wise be forthcoming. He agreed, however, to do his best; he would see his friend, a retired gentleman, who wanted to invest his little hard-earned savings securely and *profitably*, which Horace knew well enough meant a profit of about cent. per cent.

And, strange to say, Mr. Grimmett managed the business so skilfully that in twenty-four hours, not seven hundred, but four hundred and eighty pounds were in Horace's possession. A certain Mr. Linklater, who did

not wish to appear in the transaction, held Mr. Trelawny's note of hand. Mr. Trelawny never once imagined that Mr. Linklater was no other than Grimmett himself, who was joining his savings and his pilferings to those of a lady-friend of his, an elderly cook of his acquaintance, to whom he was to be united in marriage, as soon as they had enough to buy the good-will of a paying business in the public line; and as Mr. Grimmett was aspiring, and the cook fond of gentility, they had decided to wait till they could begin together as landlord and landlady of a fashionable hotel, or, at the lowest, of a good, respectable, commercial inn.

Suddenly Lord Camelford came up to town; he had heard strange reports about his second son, and he thought he might be the better for a little parental oversight. Horace found him in his sitting-room, when he came home one night from a party at the Albany. The Earl had been in town all day, and he had occupied himself in obtaining certain information—which, as Horace's father, he thought he had a right to obtain, but which gave him much uneasiness and no small displeasure. The moment Horace appeared, he saw that his father was prepared to deal faithfully with him, and he resigned himself to the unpleasant process with the best grace he could.

"And now, sir, what do you propose to do?" asked Lord Camelford, when Horace had, as far as it served his turn, "made a clean breast of it," and professed deep repentance and his laudable intention to sow no more wild oats. He had finished up with—"You must see, sir, it isn't half my fault! I had decided on marriage; I meant to settle down, and be sobriety and steadiness itself. Miss Capel was a girl after my own heart, too; a trifle too imperious, perhaps, but that is so easily remedied after one leaves the altar; and she was tremendously fond of me, I assure you, only—"

"Only her fortune turned out to be a mere report, an actual *myth*! I know all about it, and I consider you ought to be thankful you escaped as you did. Suppose you had actually married the girl, and her disreputable father had shot himself afterwards; or, worse still, spared

his precious life, and been lodged and boarded at the expense of Government?"

"Don't speak of such a thing, sir. I am sure I am very much to be pitied, for never was a fellow more completely taken in—though, thank goodness, I *wasn't* done for! But that's all over now. It is mere idiocy to sit still and bewail yourself when your milk is spilt. I must pay court to some other heiress. I heard of *two* yesterday; one is a lady, and the other is not, but she is the richer by far. I think I might get an invitation to a certain country-house this Christmas, or later—in the hunting season, perhaps—where there will be two very pretty girls, co-heiresses, with no end of money. For the present, I am going abroad."

"Where are you going?"

"To—M—to Mentone, I think."

"That means *Monaco*. I should strongly advise you, Horace, to leave Monaco alone. Now listen! I will—for the *last time*—pay certain of your debts, and I will give you two hundred pounds besides. With your regular allowance, and what you have from your mother's settlement, you ought to be able to do *very well*. It is time you began in earnest to curb your mad habits of extravagance; no income will ever stand expenditure like yours. And you ought to marry and settle down, if you can get any good, nice girl to take you in hand."

"As to that, sir," replied Horace, with a smile, "I flatter myself that I am not quite unappreciated by the ladies. I am not a bad-looking fellow, I fancy; I take after my father! And then, as the girl will some day be Lady Polperro, that's an inducement——"

"Just stop that, if you please, Horace. In the first place, it does not become you to calculate—and in my presence, too!—on your elder brother's decease. Further, such calculations are most unwise and inexpedient. Did you never, in nursery days, hear of the young woman who counted her chickens before they were hatched? Did you never read the story of Alnaschar? Polperro *may* live to see his children's children."

"You jest, sir! You have always yourself considered poor Poll as an incurable and a hopeless invalid. And

I must say you have always treated me as an eldest son, and as such, as you well know, I have been generally received."

"I fear I have been in error; you have not in any way profited by your advantages. And, really, Polperro has been improving so steadily ever since Midsummer, and has shown such favourable symptoms, that I am not without hopes of his partial recovery. He will never be strong—that is out of the question; but there is every reason to believe that, under careful treatment, he may take his place in the world, to a certain extent, and fulfil the duties of his rank, as well as the average of men."

"You don't mean it, sir! You say it to keep me in check!"

"I do mean it, and I say it to deter you from false assurance, and from building any more *chateaux en Espagne*. You might—I only say '*might*,' and I beg your pardon for what may seem like a base insinuation—but reckless as you have been, and unscrupulous, as I am grieved to say, you are, it is just possible that you *might* bethink yourself of that last and most abominable expedient of a ruined man, raising money on *post-obits*. If you did that sort of thing, I could never forgive you; and, what is more, you could not do it honourably, even as a lax world holds honour. I tell you, Polperro is another man since you saw him last."

What Horace said under his breath had better not be revealed; enough to say he did not *bless* his brother, who, after years of infirmity, seemed likely to take a new lease of life, and perhaps cut him out of the succession. But he replied, "I am very happy to hear it, I am sure, though I doubt if he will ever enjoy himself as another man; he has been accustomed so long to indulgent invalid habits and to seclusion. And, of course, he will never marry."

"On the contrary, I desire that he may. Dr. Gregory declares that there is no reason why he should not, and abundant cause that he should, since who would care for him so truly and so efficiently as a sweet, affectionate wife?"

"Oh," said Horace, with a sneer, "so he thinks he will

marry a *nurse* who won't desert him, does he? A nice prospect for the young lady, truly! The girl who marries Poll will sell herself for the sake of becoming Lady Camel-ford."

"She will not be the first of her sex, unfortunately, who has married for expediency. And I think you said something yourself, Horace, about several heiresses, to one of whom you might fling the handkerchief! The less said on that head the better. But I think it quite possible Polperro may be chosen for himself."

A few days afterwards Mr. Trelawny and the sagacious Grimmett departed for Mentone—as given out; really for Monaco. And no sooner were they installed there, than Horace had a marvellous run of luck—his dream was certainly going to "come true," as the children say. His spirits revived, and he said to his confidant, after an unusually good stroke at *roulette*, "It's all stuff about Poll's recovery! He has been better several times during the last few years, but only to have terrible relapses. Marry, indeed! he will *never* marry! I don't suppose it has ever entered into his head. I should as soon expect one of the wax heroes at Madame Tussaud's to take unto himself a wedded wife! My father wants to frighten me—to keep me in check, eh? that's all. But I'm not so easily frightened, Grimmett. Poor Poll will pop off suddenly, you'll see! I shouldn't wonder if I am Lord Polperro by this time next year; chronic invalids often seem to be taking a good turn just before they die. And it can't be so many years before—in the course of nature—I am Earl of Camelford. I sha'n't trouble myself about heiresses while my luck lasts, and I'm going to make hay while the sun shines, I can tell you."

That evening Mr. Trelawny went to the railway-station to inquire about a package which was to have been forwarded from Nice the day before. It had not arrived, and, after a little grumbling, he turned to leave the place, and hasten to the Casino. As he did so a stranger, apparently an English gentleman, pushed a printed paper into his hand, and forthwith departed by the usual *sorite*. Horace was about to throw down the leaflet, but, in spite of himself, he could not help reading the words, "*The way of*

transgressors is hard." And, what was worse, they haunted him all the evening and for many days; and they came back to his memory long afterwards, when the hardness of the way was almost more than he could bear.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TRUE LOVE STORY.

" Or in the all-golden afternoon
A guest or happy sister sung,
Or here she brought the harp and flung
A ballad to the brightening moon."

" —— who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best; His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:—
They also serve who only stand and wait."

The devil of gambling had taken possession of Horace Trelawny, and he remained at Monaco the whole of the winter, sometimes winning, sometimes losing, but on the whole a successful player. Mr. Grimmett, too, amused himself now and then at the tables, but he was far too cautious to risk more than a few florins; when he found his pile growing beside him he had the courage to stop, and so make sure of the trifle he had gained.

" It makes all the difference, you see," he said one day to a person with whom he had become intimate—the confidential servant of an English nobleman; " I've had to work, and to scheme, and to eat humble-pie to get my little bit of money together; my master has never worked for his; it has always come to him *someday*, and there's a proverb, you know, ' light come, light go.' It makes all the difference, don't it?"

" It do," assented the other; " and there's another proverb I've heard quoted, and it's ' a fool and his money

are soon parted.' You and I, Mr. Grimmett, know better than to trust to chances, though there's a law of chances, they do say, which, if you can thoroughly understand, you may win by without fail. Not that I believe it ; many a one has worn his heart out studying the laws of chance, and gone to the dogs just as he fancied he had learnt them. It's a downright madness, this here passion for what they call *rouge et noir*, and the rest ; it would be a mercy if every young fellow who went to the tables lost and lost till he rushed away disgusted. They say it's the first winnings that do the mischief : once given up to it, they can't stop themselves. Everybody isn't as strong-minded as you and me, Mr. Grimmett."

Which was true enough, for Mr. Grimmett and his friend were decidedly wise in their generation. Meanwhile, Lord Polperro was, as his old nurse triumphantly remarked, "picking up wonderful." And soon after Christmas he came to London, to the infinite astonishment of many of his brother's friends. Curiously enough, no one thought of writing the news to Trelawny, though he did hear casually that Polperro was in town. "Ah!" said he to his particular chum, Jack Cotswold, a man more reckless and as impecunious as himself ; "I know what that means. Poor old Poll's come up to town to see some new doctor ; his disease is gaining ground. As soon as I heard he was getting well all one way, I knew what would happen. Poor old Poll!"

Poor old Poll, however, scarcely needed his selfish brother's artificial condolences. For London air—or Richmond air, rather, as he stayed there chiefly with his aunt, Mrs. Tregelles—suited him extremely well, and every day he grew a little stronger and a little stouter, and he lost the appearance of an invalid. He was wonderfully happy, too, and enjoyed restored health in proportion to the suffering and weakness he had so long endured. But that was not quite all—a new, sweet hope was springing up in his breast—a hope which had risen faintly once before, but so faintly that he had hardly been conscious of its presence.

Several years earlier his cousin, Clara Tregelles, had been staying at Camelford, and she and he had always

been great friends—and yet not more than friends; except, perhaps, that they were more sisterly and brotherly than cousins not brought up together generally are. Clara was engaged to be married to a young barrister, to whom she was very much attached, and Lord Polperro at that time had no more thought of a wife than of an Arctic voyage. The one seemed nearly as impossible and quite as inexpedient as the other. Clara's rising barrister was a certain Mr. Poinsett; they were only waiting for a sufficient income, neither of them having much of this world's gear—not enough, according to the dictum of the elders of both families, to justify their speedy union.

And Mr. Poinsett had a sister—nay, he had several, but one of them, the youngest, was Clara's favourite and most beloved friend. Charlie Poinsett used often to tell Clara that she was marrying him, not so much for the sake of being his wife, as to constitute herself Violet's sister. The two young ladies were really very much attached, and naturally laid their plans so as to be as much as possible in each other's company. That summer, when Lord Camelford invited his niece to spend a few weeks in Devonshire, she asked if she might bring with her dear Violet Poinsett. Violet did so love country life, and was so tired of going out, though the season was not nearly over. She had had the measles too, in the spring, and had never quite recovered her strength; a month at Camelford Park would set her up again, and restore her to her accustomed health. The Earl, who liked to see young and pretty faces about him, was quite agreeable, and told Clara that Violet would be very welcome, and if she liked to bring another of Mr. Poinsett's sisters, she might—the more the merrier!

But Clara had replied, "No, thank you, dear uncle! I am selfish enough to want my darling Violet all to myself. Besides, we both wish to be quiet, to be real country girls while we are at Camelford, and Bell and Diana would be moped, I know. I don't believe Diana would leave town, either; there is no scenery to her like that of the Row or of Regent Street; I am not sure she does not prefer London smoke to the scent of new-mown hay! As for Bell, she is just engaged; and she would leave

her soul in town, if she went in the body to Camel-ford."

"Very well!" said her uncle, good-humouredly, "just as you like, Clara, my dear; you were always a saucy gipsey! And I shall ask old Lady Stalker to come down, and play propriety, when you need a chaperon. She is a kind old soul, and will never interfere; but it will make it easier and nicer for you and Miss Poinsett if there's an elderly lady to show up whenever Mrs. Grundy comes our way."

"But Horace won't be there, uncle?"

"No, no! We shall not see Horace's face—he's off to Norway the moment that ball at Incledon House is over. To tell the truth, Clara, I should not have wished you to bring this charming Miss Violet if your cousin Horace had been likely to be at home. He might fall in love with her, you know, and that would never do."

"I am sure it would not," said Clara, with just a little resentment in her tone, "for Horace is not at all the sort of person to win the affections of a girl like Violet Poinsett; she is no coquette, and would only be annoyed by an attachment which she could not reciprocate."

"Oh! I did not mean it in that way exactly. The fact is, you see, my dear, Horace is very extravagant—what young ladies call 'wild,' you know. I'm sadly afraid he is in the hands of the Jews already; and though poor Polperro is such a sad invalid, and lives so entirely out of the world—he does live, and may live, as I fervently trust he will, to see me laid in the grave! and while he lives he remains Lord Polperro, and the heir of Camel-ford. And Horace is only a younger son, and a very poor one into the bargain. Therefore, my dear Clara, he must *marry money*, and as I know the Poinsett girls have very small fortunes, I should not think it prudent to throw one of them in his way. Prevention is always better than cure."

"Very well," said Clara, recovering her good temper. "Only I am quite sure Horace would be safe, as far as Violet is concerned. Nothing would induce her to accept that sort of man. Even if there were no obstacles, he would not have a chance."

"Obstacles! Is she engaged, then?"

"No; not even attached; and never will be, unless she finds a lover at once noble and high-principled, of stainless character, and determined, by God's help, to do true and good work in the world, and to leave it the better for his own existence. An idler like Horace would never—handsome and gallant as he is—win from Violet any sentiment but that of compassion."

"Well! I must say you are very outspoken, Miss Tregelles! you are your mother all over. Don't say any more, because, you see, I happen to be 'the idler's' father. I wish devoutly he was *not* an idler, though I am afraid I have not brought him up to be anything else. Still, the necessity remains, as Polperro in all probability will not marry, Horace must, and his bride must be both wealthy and well born. If to birth and riches she unite beauty and good sense, and an amiable disposition, so much the better for the Honourable Horace Trelawny."

All this, you will understand, and what followed, happened several years before Horace and Hilda Capel met.

Miss Tregelles and Miss Poinsett paid a visit of almost two months to Camelford, and old Lady Stalker was just enough of a chaperon to enable the girls to feel entirely at their ease. They were very happy, and Lord Polperro, who was a little better than usual just then, seemed almost as happy as they. He could not accompany them when they went far afield, but they spent much of their time—the weather being deliciously warm and dry, quite unlike an ordinary English summer—in the beautiful gardens, which were the pride of Lord Camelford's heart. There were long, bright mornings in the shrubbery, or in the pavilion, as a large and commodious alcove at the end of the *Rosarium* was called, drowsy and pleasant afternoons in the shadow of the great limes, and merry evenings on the lawn. The girls worked—Clara was always intent on some strip of muslin embroidery—and Lord Polperro, on his luxurious couch, read to them, and infected them with his own deep love and reverence for the poetry of Mr. Tennyson. Violet became as fond of "Locksley Hall," "The Miller's Daughter," and "The Two Voices," as the invalid himself, and Clara found out

afterwards that she had learned them by heart, and could recite them word for word. They read and talked over "*In Memoriam*," but neither Clara nor Violet could honestly say they cared for it, as they did for others of the Laureate's verses, though some of the stanzas pleased and impressed them greatly; the truth being that they were too young and too happy to enter into the fulness and grandeur of that most noble poem. To read "*In Memoriam*" as it ought to be read, and to take it to heart, one must have suffered many things, and know more of life's revealings than is possible—happily so!—to youth and inexperience. But after that happy summer-time, Violet always kept "*In Memoriam*" among her own especial treasures.

Sometimes they had musical evenings, for Clara was a splendid performer on the pianoforte, while Violet had a lovely voice, and played on the harp. Months afterwards, when Violet was back again in her London home, she recalled those delightful hours; and she liked to sing the songs that were the favourites at Camelford, whenever she was alone. While she sang them, she could see again the large drawing-room in the fading summer twilight, the crimson glow still lingering in the western skies. Once more there was Lady Stalker placidly knitting, or nursing Lord Polperro's beautiful pet cat; there was Clara taking the benefit of the last daylight, or else listening, with folded hands, to the strain she loved; perhaps there was Lord Camelford, dozing peacefully in his own arm-chair, and waking up every now and then to say he had heard every note, and positively had not slept a wink; and certainly there was Lord Polperro on his Ilkley couch, by his table of books and papers and magazines—Lord Polperro, with his worn, *spirituel* face, and low, deep voice, that always seemed to chime in with the music whenever it was in the minor key. One moonlight evening the harp had been carried on to the lawn; but good Lady Stalker could not quite approve—somebody might take cold; and though the grass might not seem damp, it could not fail to be; and what if either of the young ladies should be laid up with rheumatic fever?

There was one song, a song of other days—that universal

and sweet old "Last Rose of Summer"—that Lord Polperro or his father asked for every evening. When Violet sang it afterwards, she always *felt* the influences that were around her at Camelford; she could see the large, shadowy room, with its ancient furniture, its old china vases filled with venerable *pot-pourri*, its wealth of flowers, its heavy brocaded drapery, from which all bright hues had faded long ago. She could see the smooth lawn without, the dazzling masses of scarlet geranium, and rosy and white and purple verbena glowing in the mellow sunset-light; farther off, near the pool where the water-lilies floated, and the gold-fish swam in shoals, she could discern tall clusters of flaming torch-lilies, and groups of intensely-coloured *gladioli*; and she could smell the fragrant mignonette, which grew everywhere like a common weed at quiet Camelford, and the rich perfume of the spicy, odorous heliotrope, which grew almost as freely as the mignonette. All sights and sounds and scents of those happy summer evenings were once more around her, when she played and sang "The Last Rose of Summer" in her mother's fashionable drawing-room, with all the noise and bustle and monotony of the London street outside.

When the next summer came Lord Polperro was extremely ill, and his life for many weeks—nay, for months—was almost despaired of; and the summer afterwards Clara Tregelles and Charlie Poinsett were married; so that Violet could not hope for an invitation to Camelford. And all the while she visited, and went into a good deal of society, and offers of marriage came to her, as they are sure to come to a bright-spirited, sweet-natured girl, with a complexion of the purest tints, black, glossy hair, and lovely eyes that exactly matched her name. But Violet said "No," to the great vexation of her mother, who wished her daughters to marry early and well; so that when Lord Polperro came up to town in that memorable winter she was still Violet Poinsett, and, as far as anybody knew to the contrary, fancy-free.

As for the Viscount himself, he became dimly conscious, even before the two girls left Camelford, that Violet was becoming far more to him than his dear cousin and sister

in affection, Clara Tregelles. And as he knew, or supposed that he knew, that the happiness of married life could never be for him, he laid a restraint upon himself, and was not sorry when his fair visitors took their departure.

But when they were gone, how great a blank they left behind them ! How dull were the cloudy autumn evenings, how dreary the solitary mornings, of the declining year ! Sometimes he would think, " Might it be ? Could it ever be ? Is it possible that if I were like other men I might have a chance ? But no ! I ought not to dream of such a thing—I will not ! What ! link my wretched lot to that bright creature's life ? It would be sin—crime—shameful crime ! I must put it from me, as a temptation of the evil one. Ah me ! and I thought I was reconciled to my fate ; I thought I was content to lead a lonely life, with never a dream of the sacred sweetness of wife and child of my own. God grant me patience and resignation to His will."

And ere the winter had passed away, ere the first pale primroses had budded in the mossy, ferny woods of pleasant Camelford, the heir of that lordly house was stricken with worse illness than he had ever known, and was nigh unto death for many a weary week and month.

And then he said to himself, " I am so glad I had strength to put it away from me. I was so sorely tempted to say one word before she went away, and more than once the pen was in my hand to write to her afterwards. I am so glad I did not ; it would have been deeper pain than ever now. And if my darling had cared—and sometimes I fancied she did care just a little—she would have suffered also. So I thank God that I made no sign—that she is free of such hopeless love as mine must ever be. It was a lovely dream, but it is over ; all I have to do now is to bear on, in patience and calmness, to the end. God in His mercy grant it may not be very far away."

Then he felt himself resigned—content to wait God's will. As he lay on his couch of pain, day after day, and night after night, weary, wakeful, and ever restless, he comforted himself with the remembrance that " Well waited is well done." Not for him might be the strife

and toil of life ; no labour of love or of holy duty might he perform ; the race was not for him ; the battle and the victory were both alike denied. And yet the conqueror's crown was still within his grasp, for there are fierce fights with deadly foes in secret places, as well as in the open field. *Self* may be vanquished, when there is no other enemy to deal with. No matter with whom is the combat, so that the weapons of warfare are taken from the Lord's own armoury. In that dread season of the body's pain and the soul's weakness and sorrow, Richard, Viscount Polperro, had passed from twilight—dim, misty, pallid twilight—into full, clear day—from death unto life ! The outer man might perish, and mingle with its native clay—ashes to ashes, dust to dust—but the immortal spirit, born again in its fiery furnace of fleshly pangs, in its long baptism of suffering, was joined for ever to its glorious Lord and King ; not the dead Christ, but the risen and ever-living Saviour.

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

At last it dawned upon Lord Polperro that he was actually better ; so very much better, that he scarcely recognised himself. He did not at first dare to rejoice ; he could only give thanks for the blessed respite from agony and feebleness ; and yet he grew stronger and blither every day. He rose from the couch on which he had lain so long. If he did not, like the man in the Gospel, take up his bed—like him, *he walked* !

And not since his boyhood, when the terrible accident which had so far blighted his existence befell, had he moved from room to room without difficulty, pain, and the aid of at least one crutch. And often, from month to month, he was carried wherever he went, helpless and dependent as a little child. Now he walked, with halting step, indeed, but day by day more firmly. His crutch was gradually discarded ; then the stout, trusty stick, that long ago in jest he had called his wife, because day and night it was always at his side. He began to saunter a little on the terrace, on the lawn in the shrubbery, to carry his book or magazine to the rose-wreathed pavilion where, two years before, he had read "Locksley Hall"

with Clara and Violet. For once again it was the sweet, flowery summer-time.

And what a summer to him who, for the first time for so many years, trod the greensward, and felt his feet upon the odorous turf, and gathered buds and blossoms at his will. His joy began with the fair midsummer dawn, his praise went up with the skylark's thrilling strain ; his gratitude filled all his soul, as the rose scents filled the soft June air ; as the river flowed at its own sweet will from morn till eve, so flowed the deep river of peace in his rejoicing heart. The stars, as they gleamed faintly forth in the calm and fragrant nightfall, were to him as messengers of love and promise ; the nightingale's delicious warbling gave him a new sense of rapturous delight ; and when he lay down to rest, and night's mantle was folded over the quiet, slumbering world, he could say, with reverent thankfulness—"THOU hast put gladness in my heart. I will both lay me down and sleep ; for Thou, LORD, only maketh me dwell in safety. I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever."

And so the weeks passed on, the rose-leaves fell, the tall, white lilies withered, the asters bloomed and died, and the chrysanthemums flourished and decayed, as they were touched by the first keen blasts of winter. It was when the holly-berries glowed like coral clusters among the dark green glossy leaves, that certain ideas entered into Lord Polperro's head ; but first of all he would have a serious, explicit conversation with the old doctor, who had been his medical attendant from his birth, and who knew his constitution better than any other person. "For I must have some sort of constitution," he argued, "or I should have succumbed long ago to the maladies that have pursued me ever since that unlucky animal flung me over her head on that heap of stones twenty years ago!"

"Am I really better ?" he asked Dr. Gregory. "Have I a chance of anything like complete recovery ? I beseech you to tell me the truth—the whole truth, withholding nothing from mistaken pity."

"My lord, I would tell you nothing but the truth," replied the old man ; "I never held with those of our profession who prophesy smooth things that can scarcely

come to pass. I tell you now, on my word as a Christian man, that I have little doubt of your ultimate recovery—that is, to a certain point."

"And to what point, may I ask?"

"To the point of fulfilling, without discomfort, all life's ordinary duties, and those to which you are especially called by your high position. But you will never be able to bear much fatigue; you will never be strong enough to hunt or to do a day's shooting without bad effects resulting. You will have always, to some extent, to study your health; you must not frequent hot and crowded rooms, and I should strongly advise you to take but little wine. You don't smoke—all the better for you; any kind of narcotic is decidedly your enemy."

"Can you understand this wonderful and most unexpected restoration?"

"I think in that severe, and all but fatal, illness the disease simply wore itself out. You see, it was *not* constitutional, but superinduced by the accident, which was the origin of all the suffering. You have naturally an excellent *physique*, or you had died long since in the struggle through which you have passed. I do not think the malady will recur if you are only prudent and take common care—perhaps I ought to say rather more than common care—of yourself. My lord, I trust many years of health and usefulness are before you."

"Should I be justified in marrying?"

"More than justified; you could not do better—that is, if you marry the proper person. A fashionable, fly-away young lady, who would drag you into heated ball-rooms night after night, and require you to lead a life of gaiety and social dissipation, would be most unsuitable. But a gentle, loving wife, who would share your pursuits and make your hearth and home all that they should be, is—well—well—just what I should like to prescribe to your lordship."

"You are sure I should do no wrong?"

"You would do no wrong! I have no hesitation in saying it. In marrying, you would fulfil a duty rather than commit an indiscretion. Though, of course, as I said before, much depends upon *the lady*! If I heard that

you were wedded to a fast, dissipated woman of the world, I should be very sorry that I had advised your lordship to change your bachelor's estate. But I do not think there is much danger."

"No, indeed! Such a woman would never charm my fancy, much less win my affections. And a man at my age—I am thirty-three next birthday—knows exactly what he wants. Dr. Gregory, I am much obliged to you; I shall invite you to my wedding."

"And I shall accept the invitation with a great deal of pleasure; and it strikes me that I have some slight acquaintance with the lady whom I shall then greet as Viscountess Polperro."

Several weeks after this conversation Lord Polperro went up to town for the first time for many years, and his last visit had been to consult an eminent physician. He went straight to his Aunt Tregelles—for Lord Camelford's town mansion, being little required by himself or his family, had been let for a term still unexpired. And his first inquiries were whether Violet Poinsett was yet unmarried and disengaged. When he had ascertained the fact, he lost little time in seeking her, you may be sure. He found her lovelier than ever, and a slight consciousness in her manner when first they met made him hope that she was not entirely indifferent to him. It is needless to say he proposed and was accepted. Lord Camelford and all the Poinsetts were delighted.

"If it had been Horace, I could not have given consent," said the former; "but Polperro is quite another affair. This marriage gives me most unfeigned happiness."

And, after all, Violet's fortune was much beyond what either Lord Camelford or his son had anticipated; not that the latter would have cared had his bride been portionless as Griselda. She had £10,000 of her own, apart from what her father could give her—the legacy of a godmother, not very long deceased.

The engagement once concluded, Lord Polperro was most earnest that an early day should be fixed for the wedding. He pleaded that, being over thirty years of age, he had no time to lose, and that there was no just

cause for delay. Which was simply the truth, and everybody was kind enough to be of the same opinion. Milliners and lawyers were instantly set to work, and they did their part so well and so expeditiously, that on a certain day—as we saw in an earlier chapter—Richard, Viscount Polperro and Violet Poinsett were united in holy matrimony at the well-known marriage-altar of St. George's, Hanover Square.

Lord Polperro himself wrote to his brother, who was still at Monaco, inviting him to be present on the occasion, and requesting him to officiate as best man. Diana Poinsett was to be first bridesmaid.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS.

“ We barter life for pottage ; sell true bliss
For wealth or power, for pleasure or renown ;
Thus, Esau-like, our Father’s blessing miss,
Then wash with fruitless tears our faded crown.”

AND so Lord Polperro was married; but his brother Horace rudely declined to be one of the wedding-guests. When the Viscount’s letter reached him, he became almost speechless from mingled astonishment and rage; words cannot express the anger and mortification that filled his breast when he learned the unwelcome tidings of his brother’s approaching nuptials; nor is it possible to give the reader an idea of the embarrassment and extreme discomfiture that possessed him when he at length comprehended that all that remained to him was his original and natural situation as younger son, and an amount of debts enough to sink him in despair.

For the “ luck ” which had attended his play some months ago had long since vanished: for weeks past he

had done nothing but—*lose!* Sometimes he would gain two or three times running, and then he trusted his “luck” was coming back again, and he would instantly double and treble his stakes, expecting to make his fortune at a single stroke. But it never came! And now all prospective hopes were suddenly dashed aside; *post-obit* bonds had become an impossibility, and heiresses might not be so eager to flatter the Honourable Horace Trellawy as they had been in those halcyon days when he was regarded as the virtual heir to the ancient earldom of Camelford.

“I go to his wedding, indeed!” he said to his *confrère*, Jack Cotswold. “A likely thing, when he has done me out of my—my inheritance!”

“Oh! come now, that’s too muth to thay,” lisped the elegant youth, who was not at all renowned for plain speaking, any more than for plain dealing. “’Cause, you thee, Poll is weally the eldest thon, after all, and it’s vewy hard ‘pon him if he mayn’t mawwy and thettle like another man now he’s got well and can do without doctors and phythick and all that bother, you know!”

“Very hard upon *me*,” persisted Horace. “I’ve always understood ever since I was about ten years old, that I was to take his place. I never considered myself a younger son. And now, I don’t believe he ought to be married, and it ought to be put a stop to, that it ought! It’s simply doing me out of my rights.”

“Can’t quite thee it—beg pardon,” lisped the exquisite again, as he fondled a hideous and very vicious little bulldog. “There must be eldest thons, you know! Why, I’m an eldest thon, and I thould thust like to thee my brother Ned, who’s going into the thurch, you know, ‘cause Uncle Power hath got two nice fat livings to give away, and one muth keep one’s own good things in one’s own family, *of course!*—I thould thust like to thee him, I thay, trying to bowl *me* over! I thould give him a piece of my mind! Yeth, I think I thoud—eh, Venuth, my beauthy?”

The beauty snarled, and looked as if she would like to bite somebody or other, no matter who. Horace sulkily rejoined: “That’s a very different matter, Cotswold.

You haven't been lying on your back, or hobbling on crutches for the last twenty years; you never broke your spine; Ned never had any reason to suppose that he should stand in your shoes."

"Ay, my lad, it ith always a mithtake to wait for dead men's thoes."

Horace flung away in a passion, vowing to himself that he would never again try to talk to "that lisping fool," who was in as great straits as himself, only, being his father's heir indubitably, there was no such great difficulty in frequently "raising the wind." But it was of no use to be angry; all the stamping and raving and all the bad language in the world would not avail to alter his position; he had thrown away his last chance, and he knew it, for Lord Camelford had warned him against Monaco, declaring, and almost taking oath, that if he got into trouble there, he would not help him out of it; further remarking that he must not hope for even a £5 Bank of England note from a father whom he had so continually disappointed and deceived. He had no money wherewith to meet current expenses; the manager of the hotel began to look askance upon him; sundry respectable people, and some who were not exactly respectable, gave him the cold shoulder; and, worst of all, Grimmett assumed a virtuous air, and talked gravely of those liabilities that chiefly affected the interests of the mythical Mr. Linklater. Grimmett had come to the conclusion that Mr. Trelawny was a bird who would not pay for further plucking, and that the sooner matters were brought to a conclusion the better for himself, and perhaps, in the end, the better for his master, who would only sink the deeper in the mire if he were permitted to flounder about in it, vainly struggling to set himself once more on *terra firma*. As yet the astute Mr. Grimmett knew nothing of the Viscount's wonderful restoration and approaching marriage.

It came upon him at last like a thunderbolt. He had been remonstrating with his master in a tone which was barely respectful, and he had been cruelly snubbed for his pains; when going out for a "constitutional" he met his friend, Mr. Leech, also bent on a wholesome ramble by

the "sad sea waves." That gentleman, perceiving Mr. Grimmett's discomfiture of mind, which was visible enough, at once accosted him with "Ah ! I suppose you've found your governor a little crusty—he has heard the news. I must say it's enough to stir his bile."

"News ! What news ?" returned Grimmett, ever on the alert; "I've heard none. Only I know my gentleman is in a pretty fix ; he's about got to the end of his tether, I guess, and I thought it my duty to press the just claims of my friend, Mr. Linklater, who placed the whole affair into my hands, and to whom I am naturally responsible."

"Oh, *you* are responsible ? Should I be taking a vast liberty if I inquired the extent of the responsibility ?"

"I am responsible for a good deal, first and last. Mr. Linklater's little bill is to the tune of six hundred and fifty pounds ; but, of course, *he* didn't get that. I handed him over four hundred and eighty, and the rest he takes in picters by the old masters—a real *Rubens* among 'em, done a month ago, in a garret in Windmill-street, and *mellowed* by an ingenious process, much esteemed in Wardour-street."

"But did you actually let him have four hundred and eighty in cool cash ?"

"I did. He wouldn't finger less, and I'm sure of the money, *somewhat*. Of course he pays handsomely for the accommodation ; not *quite* cent. per cent., but enough to cover delay and risk ; for he might *die*, you see."

"Of course he might. He has been going at a pretty pace since he came here. When young people sow such tremendous crops of wild oats, they are not, as a rule, long livers ; though it's surprising what some of them can stand, and not be so very much the worse. Why, if I had lived the life my lord has lived for the last few years, I should be an old man before my time, with one leg in the grave. But I say, Mr. Grimmett, it's my opinion that your friend, Mr. Linklater, will never see his money again, either principal or interest."

"What do you mean ?" asked Grimmett, his jaw suddenly falling, and his face turning a trifle sallower. "What have you heard ?"

"What you haven't heard, it seems to me, but what you ought to hear, nevertheless. Didn't you tell me Lord Polperro was a wretched invalid, shut up always with his doctor and his old nurse, and just as likely to marry as a mummy in the British Museum?"

"Of course I've told you so, Mr. Leech. It's well known that such is the case. Do you imagine Mr. Trelawny would ever have got the credit and the accommodation he has if the money-lenders hadn't been sure of being paid, and well paid, too? Men don't wait an indefinite time for their money for nothing."

"They don't!" But it strikes me Mr. Linklater—whom I haven't the pleasure of knowing—will have to wait a very long and a very indefinite time for his money! It's all rubbish about my Lord Polperro's ill-health. He may be somewhat of an invalid—perhaps he's fanciful!—but he's well enough to go and get married."

"Never! There's some ridiculous mistake. A man with no backbone, and never a leg to stand upon—to say nothing of heart and lungs, and all the rest of it, hopelessly diseased! Why, he couldn't keep on his feet long enough to go through the service. He marry! What tales do get about! Ah! it's a lying world!"

"So I've found it," said Mr. Leech, coolly; "but this is no lie. Go and ask Mr. Trelawny if to-day is not his brother's wedding-day."

"I will! I will! And by the heaven above us, if it is as you say, he shall pay for it."

"Pay for his brother's wedding?"

"Pay for his abominable deceit! Why, if your story is true, he's no better than a swindler—he's been getting money on false pretences. When that last bill was done he solemnly declared his brother was on his death-bed. Ah! he'll have to pay—fine gentleman as he is. I'll go to him this moment. He'll be off if I don't look after him. I did hear a whisper about St. Petersburg, I remember."

And away went Mr. Grimmett boiling over with wrath and apprehension, and there ensued a very stormy interview between master and servant, in which the latter certainly got the victory, as far as words only were concerned. Horace remarked that he could not keep a

servant who behaved so indecently. Mr. Grimmett replied that he could not serve a master who acted so abominably, and that he discharged himself on the spot, having, as he expressed it, "a great regard for his own character."

" Didn't know you had one; be off with you, or I'll kick you out!" was Mr. Trelawny's polite rejoinder.

" I go, sir, but you *dare* not kick me; if you did, it would be the worst piece of work you had done for many a day, and you would regret it while you lived," replied Grimmett. " Sir, I go, and am thankful to escape from so disreputable a position. You will hear from Mr. Linklater's lawyer."

And Mr. Grimmett stalked out, and with never a word about wages, packed up his effects, and took the next train to Nice, *en route* for Paris and for London, and for a good while Horace Trelawny saw him no more. But with his valet's departure went the last faint hope he had entertained; there seemed nothing for it now but to sink into obscurity and despair. Curiously enough, it never occurred to him that he might possibly *earn* a livelihood if only he put his shoulder to the wheel. Work of any sort his soul abhorred, and "duty" was something which he could not understand—something, alas! which he never even strove to understand.

Colder and colder grew the looks and tones of those around him. Everybody knew now that Lord Polperro was married, and scarcely anybody pitied Mr. Trelawny. He withdrew from Monaco, and took up his residence at Mentone, where, however, he continually met people who smiled significantly as they passed him, and where he was followed by a hundred petty duns and innumerable petty scandals. There were several good English families still on the Cornice, but they all kept aloof, and he was getting too heart-sick to make advances, which were as likely as not to be repelled. Everybody knew him for a spendthrift, a gambler, a ruined profligate; and many supposed that he had been all along a sort of impostor, trading on his brother's long illness, taking a position to which he had no right, and replenishing his constantly-exhausted exchequer by pretences little less than fraudulent. No one gave him

the credit of having believed in the all but absolute certainty of his own succession. No one—not even his most trusted *confrères*—had a good word to say for the once fashionable and popular Horace Trelawny. And once more there was talk about Hilda Capel and her misfortunes, and congratulations, which were never to reach her ear, were expressed on her escape from such an “unmitigated, heartless scoundrel!” For the world—that is, the world that knows not God, nor confesses Christ—is always cruelly hard on those who fail in the ignoble strife which they pursue. When the sin of the luckless sinner finds him out; when he eats the fruit of his own way, and is filled with his own devices; when he reaps the whirlwind that he has sown, and distress and anguish come upon him, then he is scorned, reproached, and avoided by those who only the other day were his jovial and boon companions, and condemned by all who, with more caution, though not perhaps with much more principle, have steered their bark so skilfully as to escape—for the time, at least—both Scylla and Charybdis. Yes, the devil is a hard master, and the world is cruel to its own votaries. Even if there were no hereafter—no retribution or reward on the other side the grave—methinks it would be wiser and better to cast in one's lot with the children of God, since the wages of sin seem to be death in every sense of the word.

Day by day Horace Trelawny proved the truth of the text, which he had perforce read upon the leaflet pushed into his hands by that officious stranger—“*the way of transgressors is hard.*” At length he vanished from Mentone; his usual allowance was paid to him through the English bank at Marseilles; and, without more ado, and before the money could possibly be seized by his creditors, who were as yet ignorant of its arrival, he availed himself of a sort of disguise—some theatrical garments which had been worn at a *bal masque*—and fled from the Riviera, by way of Geneva, taking a devious and unaccustomed route, till he found himself at Venice, where he determined to halt awhile, and repose himself at the Hotel Europa, his face being familiar to mine host, who had always treated him as a rich English *milord*, and his impecuniosity unsuspected.

It was a great comfort to him to return to some of his old luxurious habits, and to be able to talk with people without the risk of being stared at or contemptuously bowed away. There were several English, and some whom he knew, in the hotel; the weather was fine, and not too warm; the accommodation was of the best; his apartment faced the broad lagoons and the bell-towers of Santa Maria della Salute, and there was very good company at the *table d'hôte*, and elsewhere, if he chose to seek it. Horace determined to fling dull care aside, and enjoy himself. What if the evil day *must* come? *Carpe diem* should be his motto, and let the morrow provide for its own necessities. He had money enough to last him several months if he abstained from play. Yes; he would be happy while he might, and give the future to the winds!

Such was the young man's resolve, but somehow he found it extremely difficult to enact the rôle of the happy man. All kinds of amusements quickly palled upon him; he had "done" Venice several times before, and he found but little pleasure in exploring her treasures, or visiting her churches. He was no true lover of art, though he could talk in *dilettante* fashion about pictures, and discourse of colour and light and *chiaro oscuro* as learnedly as if he were a devoted student of the masters whom he pretended to applaud. He had read *Ruskin*, of course, and privately voted him a great bore! He got tired of the gliding, heavy gondolas, of the dark canals, of the incessant cry of *Stali*, upon the sea-green waters. He was tired of the sea and of the land, he lost all admiration for the Rialto, he found fault with St. Mark's, and a gloomy attraction drew him continually to the Bridge of Sighs. Worst of all, he was dismally tired of himself, and he began to long for some news from home, and even felt a wish to return to England, and to London, that city of delights—where the season was just coming to its climax. One fine May morning Horace was asked to join an expedition to Torcello, and for want of any other employment he consented, though, as he muttered to himself while he was dressing in his own room, he knew he should be bored to death with *Ruskin*—plague the fellow, who never

knew when he had written enough ! But he went, nevertheless, in spite of the Ruskin which must inevitably be quoted, to say nothing of Lindsay's "Christian Art," and "that insufferable Monckton Milnes !" He went because he felt literally wearied of his existence, and the foolish picnic, or whatever it was, would at least kill a few hours of the time that hung so drearily upon his hands.

Nothing happened during the seven miles' voyage across the salt lagoon, and up the samphire-bordered canal of desolate Torcello ; but on the island was discovered another party, chiefly English ; and after awhile they fraternised, mutual acquaintances being discovered, and Horace at last started to hear a familiar voice close to his elbow accosting him by name. It was Mrs. Mowbray, who, with her friends, had lately arrived at the *Hotel Inghilterra*.

"Why, you here !" she exclaimed, looking as if she were uncertain whether to be cordial or the reverse. She knew, of course, that Lord Polperro was married, and that Horace was now a "mere nobody"—an ineligible, a detrimental, against whom all prudent mammas and chaperons would guard their girls. But she did not know of his present circumstances, and she guessed, perhaps, at his debts, for she had always suspected him of a love of play ; but no rumour of the true state of his affairs had reached her ears. She quickly made up her mind ; it was mildly exciting to meet an old friend—one, too, who had been her *intime* in the pleasant time gone by ; she might as well make herself agreeable for that one day at least. So she began to chatter away, and ask after certain former acquaintances, of whom, to her surprise, Mr. Trelawny knew no more than herself. Rather sulkily he avowed that he had spent the winter in the Cornice.

"And I at Florence," said Mrs. Mowbray ; "and very tired I was of it ! After all, London is the only place—except, of course, Paris—where one really *lives*. One so soon tires of foreign cities ; when one has done all the sight-seeing, one is devoured with *ennui*, and then, if one can't go properly into society—as is my case, alas ! at

present, my income being so cruelly curtailed—one really is without resource. I found some girls the other day who required a chaperon of the ‘upper ten;’ they are *nouveaux riches*—Birmingham, or Manchester, or something of the sort, you understand—and they want to get into society.”

“Oh!” said Horace, gravely. And he wondered how rich the girls were, and whether, if he cultivated their society, the game would be worth the candle. But he was too good a tactician to let his thought escape him; he did not even ask if the girls were there, far less request an introduction, and Mrs. Mowbray resumed: “And to think Lord Polperro is married! I saw him and his bride before I left Florence; and do you know, Horace, I think you must have considerably exaggerated his ailments. He looks delicate, but not more so than many other men in society, and he seemed, when I saw him, to be in excellent health and spirits.”

“Confound him!” muttered Horace, between his teeth, grinding the heel of his boot in the sand, and feeling as if it would give him the greatest pleasure to give Mrs. Mowbray—“the old witch,” he privately called her—a good ducking in the lagoon! But that being inexpedient, he controlled himself, and politely inquired as to the appearance of the bride.

“A very charming girl!” replied Mrs. Mowbray; “a very *lovely* girl, I may say! I have heard a great deal about her—good family, sweet disposition, a pretty little fortune of £10,000, or rather more, I fancy, but certainly no less; and what is most satisfactory, very much in love with her husband.”

“In love with Poll? It’s impossible—such a poor milk-and-water creature! Of course, his title tempted her; I wonder at it, though, if she really has £10,000. And if she is well connected, as she must be, being a Poinsett, I can’t make out how her people let her do such an outrageous thing.”

“You are quite under a delusion!” softly replied Mrs. Mowbray; she liked avenging Hilda’s wrongs just then, and she knew that some of her words would go like stabs to the heart of her companion. “Lord Polperro is an

excellent match in every point of view, and he is likely, I should say, to outlive yourself, as his life is free from care, he is wedded to the lady of his affections—he was madly in love himself, I am told—and he does not mean to go much into society. Happiness, sober habits, and country air are wonderful promoters of longevity. I have no doubt he will live to see his grandchildren about his knees."

"All I know is, that he was ill enough this time twelve-months, when——"

"When you were courting my poor Hilda, you would say? Well! that was a sort of crisis, I believe; he had a hard fight for his life, and then he got better, took a turn, as old nurses say, and ever since has been gradually growing stronger. Really, you don't look so robust as he does, now! But how pleased you must be at his unexpected recovery! Though, of course, if he *should* have a son—and of course he may—it would make an immense difference to you, wouldn't it? And even should he die childless, he may outlive you—you look anything but strong and well—or keep you out of the title and the estates till you are comparatively venerable, eh? Well, I am so glad to have seen you, and to have been able to offer my congratulations on this most happy family event. I must leave you now, for I perceive my charges, the Misses Brown-Jones, are looking for me. They are nice, good-tempered girls, with such large fortunes—*very large*, I may say; and do you know, the old man, their father, left such a funny will—they can't marry any one who has not a certain amount of property of his own. His idea was that money ought to marry money. I won't introduce you, because you see you are utterly ineligible; and really, I do think you behaved rather heartlessly to my poor Hilda. No! I won't introduce you to Juliana and Victoria; better not, for all parties. Adieu."

And as for a while we leave the Honourable Mr. Treawny, and take our last look at him for the present, as he stands, melancholy and alone, close to the marble seat called "Attila's Throne," we may as well anticipate events so far as to say that in less than twelve months from that day the bells of Camelford were ringing for the

birth of a son and heir—"as fine a lad as ever saw the light," according to the dictum of Dr. Gregory and old nurse. And Lord Camelford is proud, immeasurably proud, of his first grandson.

CHAPTER XXI.

FROM HILDA'S DIARY.

"I come, I come ! ye have called me long ;
I come o'er the mountains with light and song !
Ye may trace my steps o'er the wakening earth,
By the winds which tell of the violet's birth,
By the primrose-stars in the shadowy grass,
By the green leaves opening as I pass."

"Sweet is the smile of home ; the mutual look
When hearts are of each other sure ;
Sweet all the joys that crowd the household nook,
The haunt of all affections pure."

MAY 24TH.—Spring is here again, and I had no idea it could be so beautiful ! It comes late in this fair "north countree," which I am beginning to love so well ; but when it does come it makes more than amends for its long delay. Ah, Mary, I pity you, shut up in Bryanston Square, away from the hills and vales and flowery dells of this lovely land of ours. The earth is all one flush of fresh sweet beauty ; the pearly hawthorn buds are unfolding everywhere ; the chestnuts, with their rose-touched, creamy tints, are all in bloom ; the woods are one sheen of wild hyacinths and strawberry blossom ; and the meadows are gay with "cowslips tall," purple orchis, and daisies, crimson-tipped. In the lowlands, near the river, is the intensely golden marsh marigold, that Tennyson tells us—

" Shines like fire in swamps and hollows grey ; "

and not far off are the "faint sweet cuckoo flowers," and the deep-blue speedwell, and the trim white woodruff, and a hundred others, that I have never seen before. I had no notion that these wildlings of nature were so numerous, and so very fair to see. The hedge roses will be out in another fortnight, if they do not get a check; and the ferns—oh, such lots of them!—are unfolding themselves just like *crosiers*—everywhere. Well, there are plenty of flowers in London, and lovely flowers too; but one cannot gather them at will; and doubtless town life has many advantages and great attractions, but just now, to me, the country—the free, open, blossomy, fragrant country—is simply *delicious*.

And then I am getting used to country life; I have learned to trot about in all sorts of weather, and feel quite a respect for old waterproofs, clump soles, and strong gingham umbrellas. I am taking kindly to gardening, and have a little plot of my own; I am no longer afraid of cows or of turkeys; but the *pigs* I cannot love! I shall never understand Aunt Dorothy's *penchant* for those interesting animals. I am continually reminded of the old song—I think it is Irish—which says:—

"There was a lady loved a swine;
 'Honey!' says she,
 'You shall have a silver trough!'
 'Ugh,' says he."

Our Endlestone pigs are not so splendidly accommodated, I must say; but they are so well cared for that I am sure they must be the "upper ten thousand" of the swinish multitude, and Aunt Dorothy is devoted to them. I often wonder how she can bear to eat pork, especially sucking-pig. When I heard the other day that we were going to be regaled with that dainty, I kept away from the sties, lest, perchance, I should see the unfortunate pig-babies that were sentenced to execution. I am *gourmet* enough to enjoy a nicely-cooked sucking-pig, but I think it would spoil my appetite if I had made acquaintance with it when it squeaked and walked about. It is bad enough with the chickens; luckily there are so many that it is impossible for any one who does not tend them to know one from another. Aunt has given me a lovely

FROM HILDA'S DIARY.

white hen, with a top-knot like pink coral, and I have made the creature so tame that it runs after me, actually perches on my shoulder if I sit down in orchard, which is the fowls' happy hunting-ground. She, my own snowy-plumed Dame Partlet, is never to be killed; partly because she is one of the best layers-sitters on the farm, and nearly always hatches her number, and partly because she is my property, and one but myself has over her absolute power of life and death.

I wonder, Mary, if all this sounds to you excessively silly! I am trying to think how I should have taken such a rustic, rural chronicle this time last year. What pigs and chickens to people who seldom or never see them except in the shops or on the dinner-table? What cows-beautiful, mild-eyed, sweet-breathed, sleek creatures that they are—but the legitimate purveyors of milk and butter? What are bullocks but beef? What white-fleeced, frisky lambs but a seasonable addition to spring menu—suggesting early peas, asparagus, and a sauce? Even the larks are associated with the spit, the crimson-speckled brook trout are most commonly found at the fishmongers'!

It must be so, of course; the creatures are given us our use; but it is charming to know them also in their simple, contented lives; and somehow they seem to make friends with one, and to add to one's enjoyment in many ways, while they, happily, are all unconscious of the coming doom. I am beginning now to understand Cridge's—

“ He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.”

Only, you will say, “ There are the pigs; you will not like them!” True enough, but I feel kindly towards them and perhaps that is as much as can be expected of me my novitiate, for you must remember I have only been a country maid for eight months; also I feel sure one is supposed to love all the animals equally, any more than to cherish an equal affection for all one's fellow-creatu-

It is quite time, you will say, I came to the fellow-creatures ; I think so, too. I am living now between the two houses—the Grey one and the Blue one—and that with Aunt Dorothy's full consent. She has been very much kinder to me since my illness—not that she was unkind before; but she is gentler, softer, more sympathising, and more ready to make excuses when I fall short of her standard of domestic virtue. We are all very busy, for Alice is to be married to-morrow three weeks, and, of course, it is an event of the greatest importance—the *first* wedding in the family, the first break in the happy home-circle, which has never been diminished by death, and the harmony of which has never been broken by any kind of discord. Even the little jars, from which I suppose no family is quite exempt, are few and far between, and such a thing as a real quarrel has never happened, and would be looker' upon as a terrible calamity.

Mary, dear, I wish I could make you comprehend the serene, happy atmosphere that pervades the Arnison household ; I could not myself understand it at first. Their life, as I saw it, seemed to me like a beautiful picture, the meaning of which I could not guess. Slowly it dawned upon me, the secret of their happiness. Long ago, Uncle Arnison had said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And Aunt Rose said exactly the same thing, for these two—husband and wife—are wonderfully like-minded. They seem to me to be united by every bond that can bind two loving hearts together. They have taught me what marriage may be, and what a Christian family ought to be—what I fear, though, it very seldom is. You see, they don't content themselves with talking religion or professing religion, but they *live it*. And they do not believe, as so many good people do, in what is commonly called "the religious life," apart from the common, ordinary life, which is made up of all sorts of actions, great and small, earthly and heavenly. They don't try, as I read the other day, to keep their "earthlies and their heavenlies in separate pouches ! " They make no bargain with things celestial not to mix themselves up with those that are terrestrial ; because the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and the life that now is

is so wrought together with that which is to be, that they can never be wholly separate and entire, the one from the other. And I am sure Uncle Arnison serves God as earnestly in his business as in church, or at his private devotions; and Aunt Rose is as downright a Christian in her kitchen and store-room as when she is taking her Bible-class at home or abroad. Don't suppose, though, they are dull and mopy, as I once, in my blind ignorance, thought all religious people must be. No, indeed! The moral atmosphere of the Blue House is as bright as it is peaceful, as radiant as it is calm. Everybody is busy in one way or another, therefore everybody is happy; and not only is there plenty of work to do, and willing hands to do it, but there is plenty of mirthful, innocent enjoyment. Both aunt and uncle seem always to be contriving pleasures for "the children." They have their *fêtes* French-fashion, good books of every sort are free to all, and they are never frowned down and snubbed if youthful hilarity and animal spirits sometimes get the better of their discretion.

I remember one day in particular—the twins and Cynthia and Octa were inordinately full of fun and frolic, and they got at last to be quite uproarious. I saw Aunt Rose begin to look, not displeased, but rather serious. Presently she said—"Now, my children, you are getting beyond bounds! I like to hear you laugh, and I like a laugh to be a laugh—hearty and genuine—and not a giggle, which always sets my teeth on edge, nor a simper, which is generally a sign of defective understanding; but when you get so wild and so noisy, I am afraid lest one or more of you should say or do something which you would be sorry for afterwards. Besides, dears, laughter is like stimulant—if you take it in excess, you are sure to be the worse for it afterwards. I give you ten minutes to compose yourselves; after that we will have some music, I think. I want to hear the *glees* you were practising last week, and I know Lily and Rose have a new duet, which ought to be perfect by this time. Now I will go and look at the cucumber beds, and when I return I shall expect to find you able to control yourselves." With a little effort they quieted down, and it was quite time, too,

for Lily's head was beginning to ache, Rose declared that she had laughed till a very little more would cause her to cry, and Cynthia was making pert speeches, to which she is rather prone. Octa was the only one who seemed none the worse for the explosion. In ten minutes aunt came back, and the piano was open, and the music ready, and we had quite a concert for more than half an hour. When it was over, the girls were as cheerful as ever, but composed, and inclined to talk rationally, and so the little breeze blew over, without a storm, or even a drop of rain. I thought how differently, how unwisely, some mothers would have treated this ebullition of spirits. They would have borne it, perhaps, patiently for a while—for I suppose mothers are more often unselfish and indulgent than the reverse—and then, when nerves began to jar, and ears and brain to weary of the noise, there would have been a sharp and severe reprimand, sarcastic speeches, and threats of punishment—perhaps a long “preachment,” as we girls used to say at school, when Madame delivered herself of a solemn exordium; and nothing in the world is so fruitless and, what is worse, so exasperating, as a *preachment*!

If I am ever a mother—which I don't suppose I ever shall be—I shall have learned so many useful lessons from Auntie Rose. Well! though I shall probably be an old maid, I may be an aunt—in an honorary sense, at least—to my cousins' children; or I may come to be a governess—who knows? And then I shall have plenty of opportunities for putting into practice the wisdom which has come to me through my intimate associations with the happy family at the Blue House.

June 12th.—Yesterday was dear Alice's last Sunday at home, and though we were quite happy, I think we were unusually grave and quiet, Alice especially so, at which I could not wonder. She is leaving the tried love and the safe shelter of her parents' roof, and a new and to some extent untried love is before her. I think if I were a daughter of the Blue House, it would take much to draw me away from it. Such a mother and such a father are blessings beyond price. Oh, that God had granted such to me! but He knew best. It is His will that some characters should be gently, happily moulded, and deve-

loped by wise training, and it is also His will that some should receive no training, save the painful discipline of failure and wrong-doing and adversity generally; that the character, so to speak, should be *self-developed* and self-formed; that the soul should struggle in many a quick-sand, and dash itself upon many a sunken rock, before it reaches even an earthly peaceful haven.

But may not such characters, if they will only brace themselves to bear the world's, or what we call *fortune's*, rough handling, prove the noblest in the end? May not the soul that has all but made shipwreck come into port at last, with all sails spread, and banners of victory flying? May not one who has been wounded sore know best how to heal and comfort others who are smitten in the strife of mortal existence? May not one who has faltered and fallen, and risen again in God's strength, be best fitted to go forth and labour in the wide world's field? Ah, truly I believe the saying of the dying Benedetta Minelli—

“They best can bind who have been bruised oft.”

Perhaps in years to come, when I, too, am old and feeble, and look back upon my life, as I can look back now on a tale that is nearly told, I may be able to say—

“I thank Him for all joy, and for all pain,
For healed pangs, for years of calm content:
For blessedness of spending and being spent
In His service, where all loss is gain.”

I hope I am fast losing the bitterness, the hardness, the cynicism that took possession of me when all my dreadful trouble came upon me nearly a year ago; though I must say for myself, and I know you will believe it, Mary dear, it was not so much the loss of fortune and position, nor even the disgrace of being the daughter of my poor, unhappy father, that weighed so heavily upon me, and made me feel almost like a creature accursed; it was the startling desertion of so-called friends—of those who had professed so much, who had flattered and fondled and caressed me all my life. When Horace left me, and Aunt Mowbray forsook me, I felt—oh! I cannot tell what I felt! But I was disgusted with the world, I know; I

despised men and women, and I was angry with God. From morning till night, as soon as the first stupor of incredulous astonishment was over, I cried, "Why am I treated thus? What have I done that I should be chosen thus to suffer, to be the victim of others' vices?" And, like Jonah, I said in my heart that I did well to be angry! I think your fidelity, Mary, saved me from the very depths of despondency. There was one person—alas! it was *only* one—who was true, who cared for me, and not for the imaginary heiress—one in whom I might trust, nor fear to be deceived. That one little drop of sweetness was my salvation; for I was growing *mad* in my sense of despair, and my loathing scorn of those who were so cruel and so heartless.

I know now that God sent you to me that day; that He preserved your faithful friendship for me, so that some balm might fall on the wounds a perfidious world had inflicted. But, in those days, I knew nothing about God—except His Name; I really don't think He was any more to me than Jupiter, or Buddha, or any heathen deity; and, all unconsciously, I was at enmity with Him. I blamed Him for my great sorrow, for I had been taught that He was the Disposer of all events; in my heart I rebelled against Him; if I had dared, I should have reproached Him, even! And He had patience with me, and bore with me till I learned to know Him better, and knew that He was, both in name and nature, *Perfect Love*.

But I was going to say that though I have now quite forgiven all who were so unkind to me, though I no longer dread deceit and treachery at every turn, though I find the world, after all, to be a very good world, full of loving faithful hearts, I yet have a feeling deep down in my heart that I can never love again—never marry. All that sort of tenderness was beaten and crushed out of me, I am convinced. I could never trust my fate again, never more expose myself to such an anguish as I once endured. I know there are excellent, trustworthy men in the world—plenty of them! I know that wedded happiness must be far better than single blessedness—provided, of course, the happiness be founded not on passion nor caprice, but on solid esteem, pure affection, mutual reverence. I

know there are happy wives, who only love and trust their husbands the more as the long years roll on; women whose inner life is satisfied—who could, if they chose, sing with perfect sincerity, as their eyes grow dim, and their hair silvery, that sweet old ballad, “John Anderson, my Jo, John.”

But such perfect content is not for me. There are some things that, once shattered, can never be repaired; some sentiments that, dying in their infancy, know no resurrection; some treasures that, once scattered, are lost for ever. Is this romantic? I think not! At this moment I feel a strange shrinking from the bare idea of marriage—my heart is full, I do believe, of all loves but this love! As regards that deepest and fullest of human loves, it is frozen empty—hard as any stone! If Horace Trelawny were here, I might say to him—

“If thou hast crushed a flower,
The root may not be blighted;
If thou hast quenched a lamp,
Once more it may be lighted;
But on thy harp, or on thy lute,
The string which thou hast broken
Shall never in sweet sound again
Give to thy touch a token.”

No! nor to touch of any man! the string once broken by rough or careless usage is mute for ever—its music is gone; and though skilled harpists may take it up, it can never, never more respond to mortal hand.

I did not give Horace of my best, I am sure; mine was such a girlish love; but I gave all I had, and I was true as truth itself. I think he knew that, too. I heard the other day how changed were his prospects—how he had fallen from his high estate, and I felt that if he *had been* worthy of a pure-hearted Christian woman’s love—which, alas! he was *not*!—his changed circumstances would have made no difference to me. People say he is tremendously in debt, that he gambles, that Lord Camelford has paid his bills for the last time, that he is wandering about the Continent, not daring to show his face in England. Poor Horace, poor foolish sinner! Oh, that he may be turned from the wickedness, the

folly of his ways! I will always pray for him; not that his life and mine may be blended once again, but that God may touch his heart, and lead him into the paths of peace. Hearts as callous as his have been softened ere now; souls dead in trespasses, in sins, as I fear his must be, have been awakened, and Christ has given them light. With God there is nothing impossible. Yes, my poor, unhappy friend of old time, I will never forget you in my prayers. You are nothing to me now; my love for you, whether it was the true woman's love or not, is dead as any corpse in yonder churchyard; but I pray my God to bless you, and to save you from the awful doom of the impenitent.

And all this has come into my mind because sweet Alice Arnison is going to wed the man she loves. *She* has not a fear—not a misgiving. Heart and hand are alike given to quiet, matter-of-fact John Goodman. I remember that Imlac, in Rasselas, says, "Many persons fancy themselves in love when, in fact, they are only idle." I do hope Alice's love is not fancy; not that she is ever idle; but an empty cup is more easily filled than one which holds any sort of draught. It must be dreadful to find out one's mistake when it is too late; the very thought makes one shiver. Thank God that in my chastening He spared me that most bitter anguish; it might have been mine, it *would* have been mine, had the delusion lasted but a few months longer. When I think of it—think that now, at this moment, I might be the wedded wife of one who never truly cared for me, and, worse still, one whom I should have loved less and less, and dreaded and despised, perhaps hated, more and more—I feel like going down on my knees to cry, "I thank Thee, oh my God; I thank Thee that I am free!"

I have read an old classical story of a tyrant—I think his name was Mezentius—who used to put his miserable victims to death by tying them face to face with a corpse—the dead and the living bound fast together—till the living man ceased to breathe the breath of life. Most horrible cruelty! Most appalling doom! And yet such, I think, must in some sort be the fate of those who are irrevocably united in loveless wedlock. Loveless, because

on one side at least faith is dead, respect dead also—both slain by treachery and falsehood.

There is one grand thing—both Alice and John are Christian people, and I think, even if they should find out presently that they had made some few mistakes, they would come all right in the end. A truly good man and woman, loving God and seeking to serve Him, must understand each other, and be happy when they are husband and wife, after a little while if not just at first. It must be a wonderful safeguard to love and marry a truly Christian man, and it must be dangerous to marry or even love any other.

Yes, I know it now; thank God for that also. Yet a year ago I never troubled myself to inquire whether Horace was even what is called "religiously inclined," and I never thought whether I was myself a Christian. I took it for granted, I suppose, because I went to church and had been confirmed, because I lived a decent life from mere habitude, and neither lied nor stole, nor, as far as I knew, wished ill to any person. And now—now, I have learned to know and to love my Heavenly Father; now I may "give thanks and sing," because

"My heart is at the secret source
Of every precious thing."

CHAPTER XXII.

ALICE'S WEDDING.

“ But where is she, the bridal flower,
That must be made a wife ere noon?
She enters, glowing like the moon
Of Eden on its bridal bower.
“ Now sign your names, which shall be read,
Mute symbols of a joyful morn,
By village eyes as yet unborn;
The names are signed, and overhead
“ Begins the clash and clang that tells
The joy to every wandering breeze;
The blind wall rocks, and on the trees
The green leaf trembles to the bells.”

ALL Endlestone was astir on the occasion of Miss Arnison's marriage. It was to be a regular *fête* for the town, for the dye-works were closed for the day, all the *employés* had holiday, and dined together in state. The school children of the church and of the Wesleyan chapel had an entertainment of their own, to which parents and friends were invited; the shop-keepers talked of shutting up early, and some thought it would be of little use to open at all, unless it were for a couple of hours or so the first thing in the morning.

Mrs. Dorothy had been asked to join the party at the Blue House, on the afternoon of the day before the wedding, but she had excused herself, thinking she would have quite enough of noise and bustle on the day itself. “I am getting a little too old, my dears,” she said to her grand-nieces when they were urging her to join them, at least overnight, and let the Grey House take care of itself, there being plenty of out-door servants who would be responsible for its not running away.

“ I am not afraid of anything happening to the house,” replied Mrs. Dorothy. “ Barnes and his good wife and my swineherd, whom thou callest Gurth, Flossie, would

guard my property securely ; but, as you all know, I am not so young as I once was."

"None of us are, Aunt Doll !" shouted Master Theodore—the only person privileged to call Mrs. Dorothy Capel "out of her proper name," as Barker indignantly remarked. Barker, you understand, was trustworthy—eminently so—but extremely unamiable ; she detested boys, but especially school-boys, and more especially Master Theodore Arnison. In fact, she might have passed for the original of one of Mrs. German Reed's cleverly-conceived characters ; for she would assuredly have said, if she had spoken out of the depths of her heart, "How I hate boys ! How I hate this boy in particular ! How I hate *most people*!" I am not quite sure that she did not actually so expound herself when extraordinarily exasperated. It was a very difficult thing to keep Mrs. Tryphena Barker in good humour, inasmuch as she continually took offence when none was meant, believed the whole world—Endlestone and its environs, at least—to be in league against her, and never forgot an injury or an insult, whether real or imaginary, and always forgave (?) her so-called enemies with reservation and under protest. You may be quite sure Barker was an unpopular person at home and abroad, but she was an endless source of entertainment to Master Theodore, and to all his sisters who were younger than Irene. Only two days ago Theo, as he was generally called, Cynthia, and Octa, those ringleaders in mischief, had met in solemn conclave and held "high palaver" in their own parliament—to wit, a large lumber-room among the rafters of Indigo House—in order to decide upon what trick they should play, and how they should play it, on that grim-faced, ill-natured spinster, Mrs. Tryphena Barker.

"Is Barker coming ?" asked Flossie, when Theo was silenced.

"Of course, Barker comes with me ! I never go anywhere without Barker," replied Mrs. Dorothy. "And I must request, Theo and Cynthia, that you don't torment her."

"Don't let her see the breakfast, whatever you do !" cried the incorrigible Theo ; "the wines will all turn to

vinegar, the ripe grapes to verjuice, and the creams—there's a jolly lot of them!—will curdle and become sour cream-cheeses! You don't know how she sets my teeth on edge, Aunt Doll! Acetic acid and salts of lemon are nothing to her countenance!"

"Thou naughty boy! I shall have to speak to thy father, Master Theo, if thou dost not reform thy manners."

"Oh! as for that, father himself calls her Mrs. Verjuice continually." To which piece of information Mrs. Dorothy wisely made no reply, but addressed herself to the young ladies. "I will drive over, Barker and I, in the morning, before it gets too hot; Nancy and Molly will be at your disposal whenever you like; you will find plenty for them to do, I dare say, your own housemaid being obliged to go home to her sick mother. Can I lend you anything else besides the maids, my dears?"

"I think not, thank you, Aunt Dorothy," said both Flossie and Irene.

"Except, indeed, the mugs we spoke of for the children's tea in the croft?" put in Lilian.

"Thou shalt have dozens of mugs, my dear, and the great kettle, of course; and I've a lot of pewter spoons somewhere, that would come in handy. And it is quite settled that the ceremony is to be performed at ten o'clock precisely?"

"Quite, auntie. Eleven would be too late, for Alice and John must leave by half-past one, or they will miss the train at Crabb's-end, and no other stops there till quite late in the evening. They are going to Edinburgh, you know, and to some of the Scotch lakes; John has a little business at Glasgow before they return."

"Very well! I will be at the Blue House exactly at nine. I must see Alice before she goes to church. I suppose it would not be amiss if I brought a fresh basket of cut roses and ferns with me."

"It would not be at all amiss; we cannot have too many flowers, thank you, Aunt Dorothy." And so the matter was settled. Molly and Nancy were despatched directly after breakfast on the Wednesday morning, together with a cart loaded with mugs and cans, and pewter spoons, and several clothes-baskets full of Mrs.

Dorothy's choicest flowers. The good lady herself, in company with the obnoxious Barker, drove over in the cool of the next morning; but Hilda, as you may suppose, remained with her cousins entirely for some days before the wedding. She was not to be one of the bridesmaids; she had begged to be excused when Alice pressed her; but she was entering into the affair with a great deal of zest and spirit, making herself generally useful, and being by common consent elected referee when any moot point of order or etiquette occurred. It was Hilda here and Hilda there! What does Hilda say? Go and ask Hilda; she will know how it ought to be done!

For Hilda, having once been a young lady of fashion, must needs know the exact formalities to be observed. Weddings at Endlestone were very rare events, and there had not been one in the Arnison family since Mr. and Mrs. Arnison had themselves been married, "and that," said Mrs. Arnison, "was a very modest affair, for we had not any money to spare, and my people were so angry with me for marrying Ralph, that not one of them, except Aunt Dorothy, consented to be present. And Mary Braden, you know, was married in London, and though I was invited, I was not able to leave home, so I missed that opportunity of taking a lesson. The consequence is, Hilda remains our sole authority."

"And I," said Hilda, "have never actually been at more than one wedding, but that was what Theo calls 'a very swell affair!'"

"Which ours is *not* to be!" rejoined Alice. "I want the occasion to be duly honoured, and I like there to be a sort of fuss, which will please half the town; but I should be extremely vexed if there were to be any attempt at foolish show—any kind of *pretence* at being grand. Oh! and, mamma, you will not forget the old almshouse women?"

"They are to have a bouquet and a packet of tea and sugar each to-morrow, and I believe they are asked to dinner on the following day."

"That's a darling mother! that's your own arrangement, I know! I am so glad the poor folks will be happy because I am married."

"Yes," said Theodore, with a sagacious nod, "that's the *mater* all over—just one of her little games!"

Oh, what a busy day that was, that memorable Wednesday! Olive and Jacky were packed off to the Grey House long before noon, their presence adding a good deal to the confusion that pervaded their home, from the attics to the cellars. There were no tradesmen turned into the house to work their own sweet will; there was not a florist within twenty miles, so all the bouquets had to be made up by loving instead of hireling fingers. Certainly, special dainties were ordered from York, together with the wedding-cake, but the *breakfast* was not "served," and everybody lent a hand, from Mr. Arnison to Molly and Nancy, in decorating the rooms and spreading the bridal feast.

There was only one person who rivalled Hilda in flitting hither and thither, moving this, altering the position of that, and putting the finishing touch to everything, and that person was Louis Michaud, who announced himself, as early as Monday morning, as duly-appointed *maitre d'hôtel*. The Arnisons were all clever in household ways, they were all born persons of faculty, and they were not inclined to spare pains when they undertook a task of any kind. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," had always been the motto of the heads of the Blue House, and their children, naturally enough, followed in their parents' wake—as children always will who are wisely trained by truly good parents, whose example is really worth following.

But the Arnisons had not the charming tact of Hilda Capel and Louis Michaud. *They* had the *gift*—I can call it nothing else—of doing, by a careless turn of the fingers, what others labour in vain with every endeavour to effect. No one could arrange flowers as they could; no one could mass colours like Louis; no one shake gauze and muslin out of ungraceful stiffness into graceful folds like Hilda; no one could make coquettish little bows and favours as she could; no one produce such delightful combinations of stephanotis, rose-buds, and maiden-hair, for button-holes. It was voted on all hands that Hilda and Louis must undertake the wedding bouquets, and it

was decided that the flowers should not be gathered till next morning.

" You will never have time to make them all," said Flossie. " How many will be required ? The Bradens will bring their own, of course ; and Lady Braden insists on presenting the bride with hers. There are the six bridesmaids—no, only four, because Agnes and Emily are sure to be provided ; and mamma, and Madame Michaud, and yourself, Hilda, and the four younger girls, and Mrs. Lawley, and Eleanor Goodman. There are ten, twelve, thirteen, and I know I have forgotten somebody."

" Oh, we shall manage them," was Hilda's gay answer. " Of course, Louis and I only undertake to compose. Rose and Lily will gather the flowers, and Cynthia will sort them out. And, does anybody know, was the proper sort of wire ordered ? We could get none in the town."

" All right, *Lady Hilda*," sang out Theo. " I attended to that little business ; the wire and the bouquet-papers, and some more things, came with me from York. That was *my* commission ; the *mater* knew *I* was to be trusted."

Who shall describe the increasing bustle as the day wore on ? But everybody knows what the day before the wedding is in a large family, when the first of a bevy of fair sisters is about to take upon herself the estate and honours of a matron. I suppose it was pretty much with the Arnisons as with others, but to them it was a novel experience, and they thought no one had ever been so delightfully, importantly busy before ; certainly, they never had, not even when papa received a deputation from the Agricultural Association. M. and Madame Michaud had arrived on the Tuesday ; the Goodman family were expected that afternoon, and the Braden girls, not to lose any of the fun, had arranged to come over to five o'clock tea, and " herd together " with the other girls anyhow. There was a grand contriving to " sleep them all," as old nurse said. She did not go with the children to the Grey House—she was of far too much importance to be spared ; so an inferior servant was despatched with the little ones, and nurse remained to turn sofas into beds, and to multiply dressing-tables ; and to drive about four young lasses from Alice's own class who had begged to be

allowed to come and help. Nurse was an old retainer of the Arnison family, and she was able to tell how she had put her present master *into the corner*, almost forty years ago, for cutting the lace-edging off her best cap ; and how she had nursed him through scarlet fever when the doctor had said no one else could have saved his life, his mother being dangerously ill of the same terrible fever. And now nurse felt herself to be a very important person indeed ; she scarcely supposed Miss Arnison could be properly married without her, and she would have felt cruelly injured had any one only advised her migrating with the children.

"Now, then, nurse, are the rooms all ready ?" asked Mrs. Arnison, sitting down upon one of the improvised beds, and looking a little fagged.

"Well, ma'am," said nurse, "I think there's a lie-down for everybody, and for one night people must put up with things. Monseer and Madam have the best spare room, you know, where Miss Hilda was bad so long. I grudge them having that big room all to themselves, when we are obliged to cram four young ladies into the porch-chamber. Mr. and Mrs. Lawley have the red-room, and Miss Goodman is kind enough to take up with Miss Cynthia. The Miss Bradens, and our eldest young ladies, Miss Hilda included, all manage somehow in the two east rooms. They wanted to be all together, naturally, and the door opening between the rooms is just the thing ; so I have made up the chair-bed for Miss Christina by the side of Miss Irene and Miss Hilda, and Miss Agnes and Miss Emily have got the old fold-up bedstead, that does charmingly, by Miss Arnison and Miss Flossie. I hope they won't talk all night, and get up in the morning with white cheeks and heavy eyes. When girls get together they do talk so !"

"Well, nurse, I dare say we talked when we were girls. I remember how Lady Braden and her sister, Mrs. Morton, and myself, used to chatter when we were girls together ; and I don't doubt you had plenty to say to your own particular friends."

"Ah, that I had. But one forgets, and my youth is a long way further back than yours. And yet it seems but

the other day I was hired by my late dear mistress to nurse Master Ralph, who was scarcely out of arms when I took to him ; he could not quite run alone. And then he turned out of my pretty little lad into a troublesome school-boy. I'll never forget the day he first wore jacket and trousers—they did not have the ugly things they call knuckle-brockers in those days ; and then, it seemed only a month or two and he was in his father's counting-house ; and then it was no time before we heard young master was in love with Miss Rosa Capel, and people said she was in a spear above him. And then, there was your own wedding, ma'am ! how well I remember you in your white-figured lutestring and peach-blossom spencer, all trimmed with swansdown ! And now your eldest daughter is a bride ! Oh dear, how time does slip away ! ”

Nurse would doubtless have carried on her reminiscences to an inconvenient extent, if there had not been a sudden stir downstairs. Mr. Goodman, and his brother and sister Eleanor, and Mr. and Mrs. Lawley, had arrived, and Mrs. Arnison had to go down to receive them. Meeting her daughter Florence, she said, “ My dear, do just go through all the rooms and see that everything is really comfortable—only don't let dear old nursie know you are on a tour of inspection ; she thinks her arrangements are incomparable ; but I am so afraid lest some of her beds should be penitential couches ! ”

“ I'll go, mamma, and nursie shall not even guess what I am about. If I have to make any alteration, I'll find out some plausible excuse. Poor old nursie ! she is full of your wedding-day and the blue coat and bright gilt buttons that papa wore ; and every time she meets me, she nods and says, ‘ Your turn next, Miss Flossie, my dear.’ ”

No sooner were the Goodman tribe comfortably settled down than up drove the Bradenshope waggonette, containing Walter Braden and his sisters, and after that there was nothing like quiet even for a moment. After tea, there were a hundred things to be done,—Alice's travelling trunk and dressing-bag to be packed ; the wedding presents to be advantageously arranged ; orders to be given for the workmen's dinner and the children's

feast ; and finally a rehearsal for the morrow, as far as the bridesmaids were concerned. There had been some little difficulty about who should be best man, John Goodman's brother Edward being inordinately shy, and afraid of the speech which would fall to his lot at the breakfast ; perhaps a little afraid, too, of the beautiful and stately Florence, with whom, as first bridesmaid, he must perforce be paired. He was very glad to be allowed to officiate as one of the ordinary groomsmen, and to be told off as gentle Irene's partner. So Louis Michaud was best man ; and a very fine couple he and Florence made — quite a picture, as all the servants said ! Walter Braden had Lilian, and Mr. Baskerville—foolish Fred's elder brother—had Rosamond. Agnes and Emily Braden were paired with young men strangers to Endlestone, but distant relatives on the mother's side to Mrs. Arnison.

The young girls were all pretty, and they looked most charming as they displayed themselves in their simple elegant costume of azure blue and white, each groomsman also taking his place by his appointed lady. An impromptu supper followed ; and then, when some of the young people were proposing a moonlight ramble by the river, Mr. Arnison said, " My children ! my friends ! on this, the last night of my dear Alice's maiden life, and honoured as I am by the presence of so many welcome guests, I cannot omit our customary evening worship. Shall we assemble for a few minutes in the drawing-room, and meet together as one family, asking a blessing on to-morrow's solemn service, and on the young people who are taking upon themselves new duties, new responsibilities, and, as we trust, entering upon a life of new hope and happiness ? "

To this appeal there could be but one rejoinder. The usual summons was given, and the servants thronged in. What with the family, the guests, and the domestics, the large drawing-room was pretty full. It was quite a congregation, assembling for this simple, but most affecting vesper service. Louis Michaud presided at the harmonium ; Flossie, whose tears were very ready to spring to the surface on this last night of her sister's home-life, felt that she had scarce nerve enough to lead the psalmody,

and she begged Louis to take her usual place. He willingly complied, and then came the question—which of all their favourites should they sing?

"We might sing two hymns to-night, there are so many of us," said Octa, for she and Stella had the permission, as a great treat on this great occasion, to sit up to supper. "That would be very nice," everybody thought and said. So they opened their service with "The strain upraise." Then Mr. Arnison read the 145th Psalm, and afterwards he prayed, as he always did in his own family, without any form or book. It was not a long prayer, and it was a very simple one; but all who heard it felt that its utterer was one who walked with God, and acknowledged Him in all his ways, and there were tears in many eyes and true devotion in almost every heart. Ere they could rise at the close of Mr. Arnison's prayer, M. Michaud's voice fell upon the stillness—"O Lord, Heavenly Father, bless all these Thy people here before Thee; bless with Thy choicest gifts those who to-morrow will enter upon the holy and honourable estate of matrimony. Go with the bride as she leaves the happy and most blessed shelter of her father's house, where she has been so lovingly trained in paths of piety, of peace. Bless her, and him who in a few hours will be her husband, with all the blessings of heaven and earth. Let them serve Thee ever in singleness of heart. In the dark day which comes to all, let them trust in Thee, and wait in patience and faith for full deliverance out of trouble; in the bright day let them never forget the Giver of their good gifts. Be Thou, God, their King and Lord always, the Spring of all their delights, the Comfort of their every sorrow. Grant them all sweet joys of home and mutual love, and mutual unbroken trust in one another; let their love grow stronger and deeper as the years pass by; let them, if it be good for them, prosper in all their work begun, continued, and ended in Thee; and in Thine own wise way give them their heart's desire. And bless us *all* here, old and young, and make us strong for Thy work, and bring us all to Thine everlasting glory, for the Lord Christ's sake. Amen."

Then followed the hymn which so many love—the

hymn which so many Christians still sing on earth, and which many sing no more with us of the Church Militant, because they have passed out of the dim vestibule which we still inhabit, into the Master's Presence Chamber, where they are called unto the marriage-supper of the Lamb, and sing with the great multitude of the redeemed the everlasting song—

“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.”

For such a festal gathering some may think the hymn just a little incongruous. I do not think it was, for the prayer is that Christ will abide with us *always*—in our highest bliss as in our deepest grief; that He will come as He came at Cana of Galilee to sanctify the marriage-joy, and to stand, though unseen, with the mourners by the open grave! To be with His own in all time of their wealth, in all time of their tribulation, in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment!

“In life, in death, O Lord, *Abide with me.*”

Last of all, Mr. Arnison, as became the priest of his own family-altar, pronounced the full benediction of the Church Catholic—“The peace of God, which passeth all understanding,” &c.

And then they parted for the night—a little gravely perhaps, even Theodore and Cynthia were subdued—but still most cheerfully, most joyfully. They rejoiced not as people who know not or forget their Lord. And surely they who remember Him in the sunshine and at the feast, will not be forgotten by Him in the shadow and in the hour of mortal parting.

Next morning all was bustle, and the house was astir almost at sunrise. The bouquets were all achieved, and were voted a wonderful success; an informal breakfast was taken anyhow; the bride and her mother had theirs quietly in Mrs. Arnison's own sitting-room. The guests for the day began to arrive, among them Mrs. Dorothy, resplendent in lavender satin and old point lace and diamonds. Flossie did the honours for her mother, who did not wish to appear till it was time to go to church.

I am not intending to describe Alice Arnison's wed-

ding-day—it was pretty much like other such days, I imagine. The bride walked to church with her father, the morning was so beautiful, and the way through the grounds and the home-meadow almost private and very short. The solemn, irrevocable words were spoken, the vows, "till death do us part," were exchanged, the ring was on the finger, the pair were pronounced "man and wife," there was the usual signing in the vestry, and sweet Alice was "Mrs. Goodman."

There was nothing special about the wedding-breakfast. "It all went off beautifully," as everybody said; and at the appointed time came the carriage which was to convey the bridal pair to the distant railway station. There was scant time for farewells and last embraces, which was a secret consolation to Alice as well as to her parents and to her sisters. Of course, countless old shoes and bouquets were merrily flung, and the servants and the workpeople cheered till the carriage was out of sight, and the bells rang till the old tower rocked again, till Alice and her young husband were miles away, and, at intervals, all the evening, till the rich purple daylight faded, and the summer moon rose, calm and silver bright, over the lonely mountain-tops.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HILDA BECOMES A PERSON OF IMPORTANCE.

"She's beautiful, and therefore to be wooed;
She is a woman, therefore to be won."

ABOUT this time Hilda saw a good deal of the Bradens; and very shortly after Alice's marriage she was asked to spend a few days at Bradenshope. Sir Paul had taken a fancy to Hilda, declaring that she reminded him of a beloved sister of his, dead almost forty years ago. Chris-

tina Braden, too—the baronet's eldest unmarried daughter—was quite inclined to cultivate Miss Capel's society; for, as she lamented, she had lost her "pair" when Mary married; Agnes and Emily having always been playmates, companions, and joint-stock possessors of toys, books, music, pets, plants, and all the varied belongings of childhood and youth, ever since they were old enough to speak each others' names. They were pretty, gentle-mannered girls, and were frequently mistaken for twins; they were so much alike that strangers were seldom quite sure which was Agnes and which was Emily. There was, however, a difference of a year and a-half in their respective ages; but as they were nearly always seen together, and were with difficulty prevailed upon to separate, even for a day or two, and were, moreover, exactly of a height, and of the same complexion, it is not wonderful that the delusion was very general.

Christina, four years their senior, was much handsomer, and much more dignified than these girls, not yet out of their teens, and only lately emancipated from the school-room. Christina was both the beauty and the genius of the family. She was her father's darling, while the younger sisters were the special pets of Lady Braden. Not that Sir Paul and his wife were guilty of the vice or folly—I scarcely know which to call it—of favouritism; but there is, so to speak, a natural selection in families, and in some more, apparently, than in others—an instinctive affinity between characters and temperaments, which cannot fail to unite some of them as being closer akin than the rest, who are probably not less beloved, only less understood, and less bound together in mutual sympathies and sentiments.

Christina strongly resembled her father in character as well as in person, and she had been deeply attached to her unfortunate brother Paul; she was credited with being "extremely proud," the truth being that she was naturally reserved and thoughtful, and not a little shy, though, from her grave and self-possessed manner, few persons would have guessed it. A short conversation that passed between Hilda and herself on the evening of Alice's wedding-day convinced her that here was a young woman worth culti-

vating. Hilda was younger than herself by several years, but she was, at the same time, older in experience of the world; and adversity such as she had suffered matures the mind more rapidly than any other force or influence. If Christina Braden had met the gay, careless Hilda of a year ago she would probably have felt no desire—rather the reverse—to make her a dear friend; she would never have said to her mother, “Mamma, dear, should you mind my asking Hilda Capel to stay a week with me?”

To which Lady Braden replied, “You know very little of her, my love; she has a sweet face and very graceful manners—quite the sort of girl one would call ‘charming’; but why not have our dear Irene?”

“I am not at all sure that Irene could be spared just now; Flossie goes back with Eleanor Goodman to assist in preparing the new house for John and Alice, and the twins go to Paris in another month. I am sure Irene could not leave the Blue House at present. And that is not all—Irene is a darling, and we all love her; but it is Hilda that I want. We had some talk the other night—not much; but it was serious talk, and I think I caught a glimpse of Hilda’s soul, and it seemed to me that we thought strangely alike—that there was, or that there might be, something between us which would be mutually helpful to us both. You know, mamma, I have no friend of my own. I have you, of course; but I mean no fast friend and close companion of my own age, and Agnes and Emily are completely absorbed in each other, and as we are to stay in the country all this year, at least, I do not see why I should not set up an *intime* of my own.”

“I do not see why, certainly; and, generally speaking, I can trust your judgment, Christina. But be very sure before you make any sign; you would not like to find yourself disappointed, and one cannot play fast and loose and respect oneself in friendship any more than in love.”

“Decidedly not. But I shall not pledge myself for life by simply having Hilda here as my guest for a week or so. And she is our dear Mrs. Arnison’s own niece!”

“And Major Capel’s own daughter.”

“Mamma, that is not like *you*. She could no more

help having a bad father than I can help having a good one. If ever there was a pure, true heart, it is Hilda Capel's; I see it in her face, I hear it in her voice; she is made of sterling stuff, in spite of her parentage; there is the ring of the unalloyed gold in all she says and does. But, if you really object, mamma, of course I will leave her alone."

"I do not object, my dear. Only I had a strong dislike—which events more than justified, you know—to that unhappy man, Rosa's wretched brother. If the girl had the least touch of her father in her—if she inherited, ever so slightly, the moral taint which may be in the blood—I should, I confess, be alarmed at the bare idea of her being at home with us, here at Bradenshope. There is Walter to be considered."

"Oh, mamma! Hilda is not at all *that* sort of girl."

"But Walter may be '*that sort*' of young man! This girl has a lovely face—she has a sort of beauty that does not strike, but steals upon one. When I first saw her I thought, 'So that is the scapegrace Major's daughter! A remarkably nice-looking girl, with *patrician* written on every feature, and stamped on every movement; but, by no means a beauty!' I saw her again, and was not so sure about her lack of beauty; and yet again, and wondered at my own short-sightedness. But at the wedding, she, in her simple dress, seemed to me the queen of all; or, if she had a rival, it was Flossie, who is on all hands acknowledged to be the reigning beauty of these parts. And Walter, who has been proof till now, was very much struck, for he told me so."

"When a young man tells his mother that he is just a little smitten, there is not much harm done. And Walter must marry some day—the sooner the better, I have heard you say—and if Hilda is as good as she is 'fair to see,' why not? There could be no question of stupid money in Walter's case—he is the heir of the Bradens."

"And the heir of the Bradens, my dear Christina, must marry a woman whose name is unsullied."

"That is hard, mamma. What would Mrs. Arnison say? She is a Capel as much as Hilda. She holds her

place in county society in virtue of her being a Capel—not but what all that is *trash*, for a more thorough gentleman than Mr. Arnison does not walk the land, dyer though he may be."

"You are right, my love. Ralph Arnison is every inch a gentleman, and our equal in all save the landed interest; and I would rather Walter chose either of the Arnison girls, who, in the world's estimation, are only half-blood at the best, than Hilda Capel, who is thoroughly '*well-born*,' whatever be her other drawbacks, poor girl. I do not, neither does your father, hold the old absurd Conservative notion that business necessarily soils the hands and debases the man himself."

"Then, mamma, you would rather I did not ask Hilda to come here?"

"I will hear what papa says. I am sure, or almost sure, that the girl herself is a good girl, and to be trusted. And it does *not* seem right that she should be relegated to solitude or to her inferiors because of the sins of her father, for which she is no more responsible than are you for the sterling virtues and noble example of yours."

And so it was left. Christina was too dutiful a daughter to urge the matter any further, or she would probably have won consent upon the spot. Two days afterwards, Lady Braden, unsolicited, revived the subject of Hilda's possible visit.

"Christina, my dear," she said, "I did not ask your papa to decide the question of Miss Capel's coming here as our guest. I was about to do so, when he forestalled me, by saying he should like her to be invited. She reminds him of your poor Aunt Cecily, who died long before you were born; and I must say there is a strong resemblance to the portrait in the gallery, as well as to the miniature in papa's possession. He has taken a strange fancy to her, he says; he sees what you see—great strength of purpose, much patient endurance, and unsullied truth in her character. So you had better write and say that you and I will be most happy, &c.; and add what you like on your own account."

"Thank you, mamma. I am not at all sure, though,

that Hilda will accept. And then there is Mrs. Dorothy; she may not approve."

While this little debate was going on at Bradenshope, something altogether unexpected was happening at Endlestone. M. Michaud, Mr. Arnison's partner and Louis' father, and Madame Michaud, had come over from France, you will remember, in order to "assist" at the marriage of Miss Arnison. They were to make some stay, pay a short visit to the newly-married couple at York, as soon as they returned from Scotland, and finally take back Rose and Lily with them to their house in the *Champs Elysées*. Hilda was still at the Blue House, for there was a great deal to do after the wedding, and Irene, always delicate, was suffering from the previous excitement, and quite disabled by repeated headaches, to which she was constitutionally liable. When all was quite straight again, when Irene was able to resume her wonted place, and when the family once more kept the even tenor of their way, Hilda would go back to her Aunt Dorothy. In the meantime Louis Michaud saw a great deal of her, and they became good friends. That Louis cared for her any more than he cared for the other girls never once occurred to her. She did fancy, however, that Flossie was not quite so friendly as heretofore, that in proportion as her intimacy with Louis and his mother progressed, her beautiful and brilliant cousin withdrew into herself, and became cold, and scarcely cordial. Once or twice there was something like disdain in Florence's manner, or so it appeared to Hilda, who could not imagine what it meant.

One evening in particular, when Louis and Hilda were talking of nothing more romantic than *aniline* dyes, and comparing the effects of newly-discovered tints with those of earlier date, Florence came into the conservatory where they were sitting—for the conversation had all resulted from the contemplation of a lovely new flower, which had only a few hours before expanded its petals of a rich and rather peculiar crimson.

"Flossie, what *is* the name of this plant?" asked Hilda; "I cannot remember."

"I am not sure, but I think it is a species of *Hibiscus*

splendens." The words, though simple and to the purpose, were uttered in so freezing a tone that both Louis and Hilda regarded her with astonishment. Then, before they could speak, Florence continued, "I beg your pardon if I intruded; I did not know any one was here," and instantly disappeared, taking with her a single spray of myrtle.

"What is the matter? She is angry!" said Hilda, feeling perplexed and uncomfortable. "What does she mean by intruding? The conservatory is open to every one."

Louis smiled. "Oh, never mind. Flossie has a temper of her own; nothing to speak of, but just a little snappishness upon occasion."

"She seemed angry with one or both of us."

"I dare say I have offended her; she and I do have our little breezes now and then, and we are all the better friends afterwards. Passing electrical disturbances that clear the atmosphere, you know."

"Oh, but she is vexed with me now—I am sure of it; she has been strange ever since the day after Alice's wedding. I wonder if Irene knows what is the matter. I will ask her."

"If I were you I would take no notice. It is always the wisest plan to ignore people's tantrums. Explanations sometimes lead to quarrels, whereas if nothing had been said things would have returned naturally to their usual course, and there would have been no actual disagreement."

"I shall be going home in a day or two—next week at the furthest—and I do not like the idea of leaving the Blue House 'out of friends,' as the children say, with Florence."

"I dare say Flossie will be all right to-morrow; she is not really ill-tempered, you know—quite the reverse; but like myself, she is rather hasty, and also too apt to take offence, imagining on most insufficient premises that evil is devised against her."

"If I only knew how I had vexed her! I must have said or done some thoughtless thing. I am afraid I am thoughtless."

"I do not think you are; on the contrary, I am sure you are most considerate. Just forget Flossie, Hilda; after all, I dare say it is I who am the offender. Let us talk of something else. How would you like to live in Paris?"

"Not at all, from what I know of it; I was there at school a whole twelve months, you know. Paris is delightful for awhile; it is so fresh and gay, and life there is never dull, but I should not care to be there too long; besides——" and Hilda stopped short, and the colour rose in her cheeks and the tears in her eyes.

"What a brute I am! I have no more thought than Jacky! Forgive me, Hilda, I forgot—I quite forgot—that——"

"That I have such wretched associations with Paris!—that from the gay city came the dreadful tidings that all at once changed the whole course of my existence. I sometimes feel as if the old Hilda Capel was a girl who died—so completely am I changed in feeling, as well as in circumstances."

"Do you—if I may presume to ask such a question—do you regret the old life, very deeply?"

"I regret things that happened; I shall regret them while I live. But the life itself I would not resume for all the world contains. I was happy, only because my better nature was unawakened. I regret the sin, the folly, the wasted time, the wrong-doing of those who caused the misery and shame—I regret much that transpired; but not the selfish, useless, aimless life I led, before that memorable evening when it was revealed to me that I was an orphan, and penniless, and an impostor."

"Nay, not an impostor! you had no reason to doubt your position. Who questions their right to the rank and surroundings to which they were born?"

"An innocent impostor, of course; but still an impostor, and treated as such."

"I am glad you have done with that set, they were not worthy of you!—a miserable, time-serving, Mammon-worshipping crew!—a——"

"It does no good to abuse them. I do not care to think

of them. Please do not talk about the past; I have learned a great deal from it. I owe it much for the salutary, though most painful, lessons it taught me; but I cannot, even now, bear to dwell upon it."

"I beg your pardon. Forgive my foolish question, will you not?"

"Certainly I will. And, after all, it is I who am foolish. I cannot expect to live in civilised society, and never hear Paris mentioned. I must try to cure myself of oversensitiveness. Still, I hope it may be some years before I go to Paris again, and I have no wish to see London just yet. I have no friend there, save Mary Sandys, and I hope, if Aunt Dorothy will allow it, to have her here for awhile in the autumn."

"You like Endlestone?"

"Oh, yes, *now* I like it—more than like it. But I came here, as no doubt you are aware, as into penal banishment; and I did not know there were any such persons as the Arnisons in existence till within a day or two of my journey northwards. I never supposed but that Aunt Dorothy was my solitary relation at Endlestone. Aunt Rose's marriage seems to have displeased the Capels extremely. I am glad she had the spirit to adhere to her determination in spite of them; she could never have been happier."

"No, indeed; I do not know a happier woman than Madame Arnison, whom I love next to my own incomparable mother. You have not seen much of my own mother yet; but you will like her extremely, I am sure, when you know her better. You and she would just accord if you became, as I hope you may, great friends."

"Thank you; I like Madame Michaud as far as I know her. A very little conversation with her shows her to be a truly good woman, with more than ordinary sense and a most loving heart. And what a talented man your father is!"

"Yes, I am proud of *Monsieur mon père*. He is really a great discoverer; it is scarcely suspected yet; but he and Mr. Arnison have actually created a new era in their business. They have raised it to the dignity of a profession, if I may say so; their *formulae* will be renowned throughout this century, and far into the next. They have

some secrets which even I am not yet permitted to share—secrets of inestimable worth, and valuable, as contributions to science as well as to the trade."

"I had not a notion that dyeing involved so much chemistry and learning. I never guessed it till one evening, soon after I came here, when Uncle Arnison explained—as far as I could understand—all about the polarisation of rays of light. I did not know that dyeing had so much to do with optics and chemistry."

"And, commonly speaking, it has not. We—that is, the firm of *Arnison and Michaud*—are colour manufacturers as well as dyers; we make and invent our own dyes."

"All of which have their origin in the rainbow!"

After this evening Madame Michaud seemed to make a point of securing Hilda as a companion; Flossie remained cold and distant both to Louis and to Hilda; Irene thought she was not well, and the children complained that "our eldest" was *cross*, which dear Alice never was. And Cynthia remarked, in her pert fashion, "Perhaps it is the responsibility of being Miss Arnison, and not Miss Florence as heretofore, that weighs upon her and ruffles her equanimity!" Her mother said one day, "Flossie, does anything ail you? You have not been the same since the wedding." And Flossie replied, "Is it not natural that I should feel dull and dispirited after all the excitement, and would it not be *unnatural* if I did not miss dear Alice sadly?"

One morning, after a private and confidential confab with Mrs. Arnison, Madame Michaud asked Theodore if he would drive her over to the Grey House, as she wanted a chat with Mrs. Dorothy. "I am your man, *chère Madame!*!" cried Theo, flinging down the broken croquet mallet which Octa, with a dismayed countenance, had just brought him, and well pleased at the idea of being trusted with the ponies, which were tolerably spirited animals, and supposed to require a masculine hand. "I'll see to this another time, Octa. I say, you'll catch it, though, breaking up this new set, that cost a mint of money not two months ago! But I think it *can* be spliced. Anyway, it *can* have a new handle put in. I should think young Longrigg could manage it. Don't fret, Octa! I'll

see to it, and meanwhile one of the old mallets can do duty. Yes, *Madame*, I'm off this moment to order round the pony-carriage, and I'll tool you along in fine style, and keep the beasts in good order too. I can drive; ask Hilda if I can't."

"I hope you can, indeed," replied Madame Michaud. "I should be very loth to trust myself to your care, if I thought you could not; for, like the lady whom your dreadful Henry VIII. courted, I have but one neck! and my husband might disapprove of my risking that one."

"Oh! your neck is all safe, as far as the ponies are concerned. They want to know who's behind them, and they are meek enough. Will you be ready in ten minutes?"

The drive was safely accomplished. Theodore had made no vain boast; the ponies, though frisky little creatures, were more playful than vicious, and they conducted themselves with perfect propriety, after the first start, feeling, doubtless, that a firm and qualified hand grasped the reins. Mrs. Dorothy Capel was at home, and very glad to see Madame Michaud. Theodore, having secured the ponies, went off, as he told the ladies, "to leave his card upon the pigs."

"Now, thou wilt never guess why I am come to visit thee!" said Madame, who was accustomed to *tutoyer* Mrs. Dorothy.

"Hast thou business with me, then?"

"That I have, and important business, too. But dost thou not divine anything?"

"Truly no! unless, indeed, thou wouldest have the little sow I was praising to thy husband? He was complaining of the French breed of pigs, and thought they might be much improved."

"Thy sow, indeed! No, I want no pig of any sort; for all Monsieur says, there are better pigs in France than were ever bred in England. The swine in this country are too fat and too lazy by half. It is of thy niece, Hilda, I would speak. Thou art, Rose Arnison tells me, her sole guardian."

"I believe I am, though I have no legal control over

her that I know of. Since thou dost not want my beautiful little sow, thou wantest my handsome grand-niece, perchance?"

"My son Louis wants her. He loves her, and I am here to ask her hand."

"Yes, that is French fashion, I know; the mothers do the courting. But I have not the disposal of Hilda's hand, and, therefore, cannot bestow it. Moreover, Hilda has no *dot*—not the fraction of one! and I have always understood that the French are inexorable on this point."

"Usually it is so; but my son is more English than French in some of the views he takes. He wants Hilda, and only Hilda, because he loves her."

"Then he must ask Hilda."

"That seems to me a very improper mode of proceeding. In our country it would be condemned as imprudent and indelicate!"

"And we English see neither imprudence nor indelicacy in honourable proposals of marriage being made by the suitor himself to the girl he thinks he loves, and desires to wed. I could not, if I would, answer for Hilda; she must speak for herself."

"Very well, if thou wilt have it so. Rose Arnison told me I was going on a wild-goose chase. I shall, then, speak to Hilda myself."

"Why not let thy son speak? English girls are not accustomed to being courted by proxy. Hilda is no coquette, she will give Louis such an answer as her heart dictates."

"I prefer that my son's wife should be sought as his mother was sought and won. At least thou wilt tell me whether thy niece is free?"

"Entirely so. Thou knowest, though, she had a love affair, which was broken off because she turned out to be no heiress!"

"Yes, I have heard that story, and Louis knows it too. But thou dost not think Mademoiselle Hilda cares still for that young man?"

"I am almost positive she does not care one straw for him! But I am nearly as sure that for some time to

come she will not care for any one else. I do not think Hilda is at all likely to form any engagement at present."

"Thou thinkest she will refuse my Louis?"

"That is my opinion."

"But should she consent thou wilt not refuse thy sanction?"

"That I will not; on the contrary, I should be pleased to see Hilda a happy wife; but a happy wife she would never be if she married without love."

"Bah! you English have such notions!" said Madame Michaud, rubbing and wrinkling her nose. "Of course she will love him when they are contracted. There are not many young men like my Louis. Adieu, Madame Dorothy! I go to propose to Mademoiselle Capel on my son's behalf."

"I wonder now what answer Hilda will give!" murmured Mrs. Dorothy, as Madame Michaud and her young charioteer drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MOTHER'S CONFESSORIAL.

"My daughter, there is nothing held so dear
As love, if only it be hard to win.
The roses that in yonder hedge appear
Outdo our garden-buds which bloom within.
But since the hand may pluck them every day,
Unmarked they bud, bloom, drop, and drift away.

"My daughter, my beloved, be not you
Like those same roses."

"WHERE is Theo?" asked Florence, coming into the room where her mother was reading with the four younger girls, according to daily custom.

"He is gone to drive Madame Michaud to the Grey House," replied Mrs. Arnison, closing her book as she spoke. "You may go now, children; Cynthia and Octa to practise your duets, and Stella and Olive to nurse, who will give you some sewing."

"I *hate* sewing!" pouted Stella; "my hands get hot, and the needle pricks my fingers, and I don't see the good of it."

"Nevertheless, my little daughter must be content to obey her mother, who is quite sure that every little girl should learn to sew neatly and quickly. And there are some things—sewing is one of them—that must be practised in early life if they are ever to be done easily and well."

"But, mamma," pleaded Octa, "now that we have sewing-machines, why should ladies trouble themselves to sew with needle and thread? See how much quicker and nicer the machine does it all!"

"But the machine cannot do everything; there are many little odds and ends that must be accomplished by hand. Besides, you cannot be sure of having a machine, unfailingly, at command. And sewing is woman's work, though not in the sense it was once supposed to be. When I was a little girl, we were taught to stitch, and make button-holes, and gather, and all the rest of it, when we were quite children; and I believe many bright young eyes were spoiled over common needlework. Now, I have never given you any stitching to do, because the machine can do it so much better, and I only wish you to use needle and cotton for one hour in the day—Saturdays, and of course Sundays, excepted—in order that you may acquire nice, neat, womanly habits. I should not like you to have to say in a few years' time that your mother never taught you to sew. My dears, you may trust me that I know what is best for you, and what is best is always happiest in the end. When you are older, I shall let you judge for yourselves. Your grown-up sisters employ their time very much as they like, and are, generally speaking, a law to themselves; but they have regular duties to perform, and they have been trained, as you are aware, to occupy themselves continually."

"In books, and work, and healthful play,
Let my first years be passed."

quoted Cynthia, with her most sagacious air. She was trying to rank herself with the grown-up girls of the family, but somehow, she could never succeed in impressing upon any one the doubtful fact of her womanhood. Theo had told her, only a day or two before, when she was sighing for a dress with a train, that she was only a "long-legged, scraggy, tom-boy of a girl!" and that she would not be counted a woman till she had quite left off climbing trees, and tearing her frocks, and forgetting to learn her lessons. And Cynthia, though full of anger, could not but secretly admit the justice of her brother's observation. She answered him in the recriminating fashion of very young people: "Then if I am a mere schoolgirl, you are nothing but a schoolboy! you are not much more than a year older than I am. There now!"

"Of course I am a schoolboy," was the cool rejoinder. "I don't pretend to be anything else, and I don't want to. I shall be a man all in good time, if I live. And when once I am a man, I can never be a boy again, however much I wish it, while I shall keep on being a man, till I have white hair, and no teeth, and wear spectacles, and am generally patriarchal and rheumatic. But girls are such sillies! they always want to make believe they are something they are not! And of all the girls I know, Cynthia, you can be the silliest, when the mood is on you."

And Cynthia, having a wholesome dread of Theo's decidedly unflattering criticisms, held her peace.

Florence had loitered while the little girls put away their Bibles, and when they were gone, she said, colouring a little as she spoke, "What takes Madame Michaud to the Grey House so early in the day?"

"You are a little inquisitive, my dear," replied Mrs. Arnison, looking up from her writing-desk, which she had just opened. "Do you really wish to know?"

"I am almost sure that I do know. No one ever tells *me* anything; I am kept as much in the dark as the children are; but I have eyes and ears, and I can put two and two together as well as anybody, and I am seldom wrong in my conjectures."

Mrs. Arnison put down the pen she was just going to dip into the ink, and pushed her desk a little further from her, in token that she was not ready to commence her letter-writing. She was greatly surprised, and even pained, at Flossie's unusual tone and manner; she had noticed for days past that something was wrong with her eldest home-daughter. At first, she had been willing to put it down to separation from the sister who had been as a second self from her earliest remembrance, and to the inevitable reaction which must ensue after a season of excitement. Mrs. Arnison herself had been conscious of things jarring upon her, of a weary, out-of-tune sort of feeling, such as even very well regulated minds are subject to, on extraordinary occasions, and she had not been hard upon her children, who might be forgiven if they displayed a transient pettishness and naughtiness which were not their ordinary attributes. The Blue House had been most thoroughly upset in more ways than one, and parents, children, and servants all experienced the uncomfortable and unsettled sensation which is pretty sure to surprise those who have suffered from recent domestic *bouleversement*.

But the mother was now convinced that something deeper than external commotions, or even the breaking-up of childhood's ties, was the cause of poor Flossie's strange transformation. Flossie was not herself, and she must, if possible, be set right. But Mrs. Arnison was, as you know, a wise as well as a tender mother; she did not forget, as, alas! so many of us do, that she had been young herself. She, too, had been a girl of twenty once upon a time, and she remembered still the trials and difficulties and weaknesses incidental to that age; she might smile on them now, having left them far behind her on the road of life, but they had been real enough when they occurred, just as an infant's grief is for the moment profound as the anguish of a man, with only this difference, that the one is fleeting and the other endures—God knows how long!

"Shut the door, Flossie, and come and talk to me."

Flossie instantly obeyed, because with all the young Arnisons prompt obedience was an instinct; but for the

first time in her life she felt some misgivings when she found herself closeted with her mother, and she dreaded the questioning that might ensue. Her face was nearly colourless when she turned round and looked at the gentle but anxious countenance before her. She need not have feared ; there was nothing like reprimand or reproach in those soft, dark eyes, on that quiet, earnest brow. Mrs. Arnison was every inch a mother, and a mother would rather bear any pain than inflict it, except from sense of duty, on her child. "Sit down, my Flossie, and tell me all about it," was what she said.

For answer, Flossie sat down on the stool at her mother's feet, laid her head in her lap, and burst into an agony of tears. Mrs. Arnison let her weep on for a little while—the opening of the flood gates would perhaps be beneficial ; then she stroked the girl's flushed cheek and kissed it, smoothed her disordered tresses, and again said, "Tell me all about it, darling ! What is it vexes you ?"

"Mamma, I cannot tell you ; that makes it so much more miserable."

Now, an ordinary mother would have pressed for her daughter's confidence ; a foolish, self-centred mother would have demanded it. But Mrs. Arnison was no ordinary mother, and self was not her idol ; she knew that her child had grown into a woman, and might have her woman's secrets ; she must, therefore, even from her own mother, receive the respect due from woman to woman. She simply answered, "Are you sure you cannot, my Flossie ?"

"Quite sure ! That is, not now ; some day, perhaps ! Oh, mother, mother ! I am very unhappy, and so much ashamed of myself. I have behaved infamously ever since the day after the wedding."

"I have seen, my dear, that something was greatly amiss. At first, I thought—I felt sure—it was having to part with your sister ; and being depressed myself, I was altogether in sympathy with you."

"No, mamma, it was not *that* ! I am afraid you will hate me—I hate myself, I know!—but something else so filled my mind that I thought shamefully little about Alice, when once she was gone. Something happened

next day that showed me to myself—that told me a secret about myself and about another person. Please don't ask what it is, mamma, dear! I *couldn't* tell you."

"I ask nothing, dearest. There are some things one cannot tell—not all at once, that is; also, there are some things that are best left unspoken. And you know, my child, you may depend upon your mother in any case; when you want to speak, come and speak; so long as you would keep silence, keep silence, without fear of being misconstrued."

"This much I may tell you, mother—I have been in a very bad state of mind for nearly a week. I am sure I have made myself generally disagreeable."

"Yes, my dear, I think you have! If it had been one of your younger sisters—say Octa, or Cynthia—she would probably have received some punishment."

"I deserve punishment, and I am punished. I never had a secret from you before, mamma, and it is wretched to have one now; but I *cannot* help it."

"I know you cannot. But, Flossie, suppose I tell you I guess your secret? Don't start and quiver so, my poor child—I will not tell you what I guess, I will not ask you a single question. Some wounds require to be probed, I know—cruel as, to the patient, the process *must* be; yours, I think, will heal best if left untouched and kept from the light and common air. I only wish you had gone to York on Monday with Eleanor, as at first arranged."

"I wish I had! I wish I had! It was a most unworthy motive that made me excuse myself till next week. Mother, at the time, I felt as if I must stay at home—as if I could not just then leave the Blue House."

"It seemed like letting things take their course unchecked."

"It did. Oh, mother, I see you understand; and you don't despise me?"

"Despise you, my child!" and Mrs. Arnison kissed the poor, tear-stained face so tenderly that Flossie was at once consoled and inspirited. "I could never despise you, my dear, but I might feel grieved. I might feel ashamed for my daughter if she resigned herself without a struggle to the weak indulgence of regrets which are

unavailing. Don't think me *very* unfeeling, Flossie, but I must confess to having always entertained a pity, slightly akin to contempt, for love-lorn damsels who nurse their sorrows till they become a burden to themselves and a bore to all about them. Flossie, there are few lives in which one has not at some time to suffer and be silent, though some, ignoring the poet's counsel to suffer and be strong, choose rather to suffer and to *scream*. Shall I tell you the best cure in the world for *mal-de-coeur*—such as yours?"

"It is absence, I fancy, you will say?"

"Absence, if necessary, most certainly. But even more potent than absence is plenty of work—not mere aimless work, just to keep the hands employed, but full and useful occupation. Some task to be accomplished, some grand point to be attained, 'something attempted, something done,' as your favourite poet says, must be your tonic, your moral and mental quinine. As for your heart's pain, my dear, take it to God, tell Him all about it, and ask Him what you are to do with it. And, Flossie, there is such a thing as woman's *pride*, so called, which is really woman's sweet modesty—no woman should give herself unsought."

"But, mamma, I did think till lately—till Hilda was so much with us—don't you understand, mamma, without my telling you exactly how it was?"

"Yes, my dear, I think I do, though I am not certain. And I cannot help wondering whether I am not to blame myself. I am afraid I have not guarded my daughters sufficiently."

"You never thought one of your daughters would be so foolish! It was so different with Alice—our dove Alice. And Irene, though she has not a quarter of what nurse calls 'my spirit,' has more than twice my strength of mind. Don't blame yourself, mother darling! That would be the worst punishment of all, if I thought I made you unhappy, as I know you would be if you fancied you had failed, ever so little, in your duty to any of us."

"I shall not be unhappy, dear, though I do somewhat take myself to task. Mothers are no more infallible than daughters. Shall I tell you the truth, my dear? I have,

somehow—foolishly perhaps—learned to look on Louis as on Theodore; Alice and Irene, as well as the younger ones, have always treated him as a brother. And both your father and myself were pleased, when we fancied we detected a *penchant* for Hilda. Do I hurt you, my poor child? I feel as I did when I was rubbing *opodeldoc* on Jacky's scratched arm yesterday. But Jacky came to me in the evening and said, ‘Smart gone now, mamma; “*oppledock*” very good!’ ”

“Then you saw what I saw?”

“Yes, I could not help but see it, and others saw it, too. But when I say I was pleased, I scarcely express my real feeling, for I do not think anything can come of it. Hilda has suffered so much, and her girlish faith has been so rudely shaken, that I shall be very much surprised if she consents to listen to one word of love. You guessed Madame Michaud’s mission to Aunt Dorothy, you say?”

“Yes, she is gone—French fashion—to ask for Hilda’s hand, I imagine.”

“She is. She came to me first, but I would have nothing to do with the business; I will not trench on Aunt Dorothy’s prerogatives. At the same time, I feel convinced Aunt Dorothy will no more give Madame Michaud her answer than I would; the question must be referred to Hilda herself, as in John Goodman’s case it was to Alice.”

“And you think Hilda will refuse him?”

“I do think it, though of course I cannot be positive.”

“Is it, do you suppose, that she still loves that Tre-lawny man—Lord Camelford’s son?”

“She does not love him, I believe—I cannot say more; she has only spoken once to me, and that slightly, concerning her former engagement. My own opinion is, that she will turn a deaf ear to any man’s addresses, for a long while to come. If Louis be content to serve like Jacob for seven years, he *may* win her at last; at present, I feel assured he has not a chance, not the shadow of a chance. Hilda no more thinks of him as a possible lover, than she thinks of Theodore in such a character.”

“I hope she will not make him miserable.”

"He will be disappointed, but scarcely miserable; and one thing is sure: Hilda is no coquette; she will know her own mind, and she would disdain to torment him, as I have known girls torment men, neither taking them nor leaving them, as people say. Louis, at least, will have his answer."

"Things go very contrariwise in this world, don't they, mamma?"

"They seem to do so; but remember, we only see the wrong side of the unfinished pattern! Woof and warp, and shade and colour, are all intermingled in what to the bystander seems a blurred and inextricable confusion. But the Master-weaver knows what He is about, and it will all come out clear and beautiful in the end. And all the threads of our lives, and all the threads of other lives that cross with ours, are in God's hand. What looks like confusion and mistake now will prove to be beauty and order when the right time comes."

"What shall I do, mamma?"

"Nothing; only ask God to show you your duty. I will try to think what is best for you. Go on in your usual way; occupy your mind as fully as possible, and think about everybody but yourself, and about everything but the one thing that cannot do you any good. I may say to you, in the words of another mother:—

"My daughter, sorrow comes to all;
Our life is checked with shadows manifold,
But woman has this more—she may not call
Her sorrow by its name. Yet love not told,
And only born of absence and of thought,
With thought and absence may return to nought."

"That is *Jean Ingelow*, I know. John Goodman read '*The Four Bridges*' to us the last time he came before the wedding; we were sitting under the apple-trees, that fine May afternoon, and the blossoms fell all over our work. Mother! I will try to be good,—to be brave, to be worthy of *my mother!* I almost wish Hilda might say 'Yes,' and then there would be an end of it. You will let me know what Aunt Dorothy says—will you not?"

"Of course I will. Kiss me, love; for we must stop talking now. I see that you will not disappoint me; you

will be strong and prudent and sensible. And no one will know anything about this but our two selves."

" You will not tell papa, then ? "

" Not now, most certainly ; mothers may keep a daughter's secret when duty does not call upon them to disclose it. You have given me your confidence, and I shall respect it as much as if you were some other girl asking my advice. Of course, if need were—ever such a little need—I should tell your father. As things are, I do not see that aught would be gained, and he has so much upon his mind just at present, that I should be sorry to add any further care. Also, it might embarrass his relations, both with Louis and with Hilda, not to speak of the elder Michauds."

" You are a mother in a thousand ! I am sure there are not many more such in the world ! What can poor girls do who have no mother to go to ? and there are some mothers, I know, that are worse than none, where confidences, such as this of mine, are concerned. Good fathers are great blessings and great comforts, especially such a father as mine, at once so loving and so wise ; but there are times when a girl wants her mother and no one in all the wide world beside. Oh, mamma, dear ! there is the pony-carriage coming back. Madame Michaud will come straight to you ; I will go and help Irene in the linen-room."

But Madame Michaud did not go straight to her friend's dressing-room ; she found Hilda in the hall tending the plants in the *jardinière*, and the good lady, deeming no time like the present, and anxious to carry good news to her expectant son, at once addressed her. " Hilda, ma chère, I have a word for your ear. Will you come into the garden with me ? It will be cool in the *berceau*."

Without hesitation, Hilda took her broad-brimmed hat from the cloak-closet just by, wondering extremely what Madame Michaud could possibly have to say to her in particular. " But, perhaps," she thought, " she brings some special and private message from Aunt Dorothy. She has just returned from the Grey House."

She felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet, when she understood perfectly on what Madame was bent.

Louis want to marry *her*! Mrs. Arnison was about right when she said Hilda would as soon have thought of Theodore as of Louis. Madame Michaud, of course, explained that she spoke to her because neither of her aunts would charge themselves with the duty of establishing their niece. "And I cannot establish you and range my son at the same time," she continued; "it is altogether unprecedented and out of order in our family; but I cannot help myself. One must conform to English ways in the English country, and so I ask you, Mademoiselle, to bestow yourself upon my son Louis, at the same time assuring you that I approve his choice, and receive you with all possible cordiality."

"Does Louis know what you ask?" asked Hilda, colouring to the roots of her hair.

"Assuredly he knows. He wanted to speak himself, but I could not permit it. Louis is a Frenchman, and he must woo his bride as his father before him wooed his. I never dreamed of marrying M. Michaud till my mother told me his mother had been to her, and that it was all properly arranged. It was time that I was established, and Louis—my husband, you know—wanted to be *ranged*! The two mothers settled it all; a notary was set to work, the contract was signed, and our betrothal was celebrated with all honours. In less than a month we were man and wife, and I have never regretted it. May Louis and Hilda be as happy as Louis and Josephine have been—and are!"

"But, Madame," replied Hilda, almost out of breath with the rapidity of the good lady's proceedings, and quite taken aback at the evident assumption of her own consent, as a matter of course; "I am greatly obliged to M. Louis and to yourself; you do me too much honour! Nevertheless, I cannot marry your son."

"You cannot marry my son? And why not?"
"I do not love him."

"Of course not. You are a modest girl. But you will love him now that I have spoken to you, and I suppose he will do his courting in the usual English fashion, which is certainly indecorous. My husband thought it a great privilege when he was allowed to kiss my hand in the

presence of our assembled friends on the night of our public betrothal. I never saw him alone till after the marriage ceremony was performed."

"But, Madame," persisted Hilda, "I *cannot* love your son. I have no wish to marry—in plain words, I will not marry—*any one!* And I am quite sure that neither of my aunts nor my uncle will endeavour to constrain me. All I ask is to be allowed to remain as I am."

"I never heard such nonsense in my life. Child! this is the very quintessence of folly. Refuse to be honourably established! Refuse Louis Michaud—*my son!*"

"I am so sorry, Madame; I never thought of anything of the kind. But indeed it must not be; I would not do M. Louis so great a wrong as to accept his proposals. You will be so good as to tell him so!"

For once Hilda blessed the French fashion, which laid the onus of proposing on the *prétendu's* mother. She was thankful she had not to deal with Louis himself, and yet she must meet him; he would perhaps scheme to see her alone, and plead his cause in person. That very morning she had received the invitation to Bradenshope, and had almost decided not to accept it, as she felt her duty pointed her to the Grey House.

"I must consult Aunt Rose," she said to herself; "perhaps it might be best to go to Bradenshope just now? What could make Louis Michaud think of me? Ah! was *that* what made Flossie so strange, I wonder!"

CHAPTER XXV.

GOING TO BRADENSHOPE.

"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel."

"AUNT DOROTHY, shall I go to Bradenshope, or come back to you?" asked Hilda, later in the day, Mrs. Dorothy having walked over to the Blue House to ascertain how

matters were really going on. "One thing is certain—I cannot remain here just now. Oh, dear! oh, dear! why will people fall in love, and upset everything? and I was getting to feel so friendly with Louis, counting him the same as Theodore, only older. It is very provoking, Aunt Dorothy, is it not?"

"It is rather tiresome, I must confess; that is, if thou art perfectly sure thou knowest thy own mind, Hilda? Louis Michaud would make thee a good husband, I doubt not."

"He would—he will make a good husband to somebody some day, but not to me. And he is so good and nice in himself that he deserves a far better wife than I should be to him. I would not for the world do him so great a wrong as listen to his proposals."

"I hope, child, that thou dost not care still for that young sprig of aristocracy that treated thee so shamefully? I value constancy as much as thou canst; but then, the thing or creature to which thou art constant should be beyond all dispute worthy of constancy."

"I would not at any price marry Horace Trelawny. It still gives me pain to think of him; but it is quite a different kind of pain from that I felt when first I discovered that he had courted me only for the money I was supposed to have. My esteem for him is dead; I no longer respect him—how, therefore, should I love him? Indeed, he has become to me something of a myth, for the ideal Horace, for whom I did care so much, never actually existed. Don't be afraid; I am not refusing Louis Michaud for the sake of Horace Trelawny. It is simply that I do not and cannot love him, and that my earnest desire is to remain a single woman."

"I should be the last to bid thee marry without affection; but be quite sure thou dost not deceive thyself; a single life has its regrets."

"And so has many a married life. But my life shall not be single—it shall be plural, very plural, if I can but make it so! All loves but the one love shall be mine; I will cast in my lot with that of my relatives, I will sympathise with all sad and afflicted ones, I will help those who need help; in short, I will be an 'unappro-

priated blessing,' and in the end people shall be very thankful that I kept my maiden estate."

"Very well, I will say no more; thou hast a home with me while I live. The present question is, whether or not thou goest to Bradenshope."

"What do you say, Aunt Dorothy? It shall be as you please."

"If I did as I pleased, I should tell thee to pack thy things and return with me to the Grey House, and stop there. But, taking all the circumstances into account, I think it will be good for thee, and more comfortable for several other persons, that thou shouldst go to Bradenshope; and Christina Braden is an admirable young woman, and worthy to be thy friend."

"Is she as dear and sweet as Irene?"

"She is so very different from Irene that it is not easy to answer thy question. Then must judge for thyself. Yes! I choose for thee, since I see thou really awaitest my decision; thou shalt pay this visit; thou shalt go on the day appointed; as they have been so kind as to ask thee in such friendly fashion, I should not like thee to appear ungrateful. But as thou canst not go to Bradenshope till the day after to-morrow, thou shalt go back presently with me, if thy Aunt Rose has no objection. Let us ask her at once."

Mrs. Arnison was of opinion that Hilda had better not leave the Blue House so abruptly.

"We are not a small family," she said, "and you and the Michands need not be thrown too closely together. You do not wish that it should be spread abroad that you have refused the young man; but if you go off immediately, leaving your luggage behind you, like a young lady in a novel, something will naturally be suspected. The girls know you are asked to Bradenshope; all you have to do is to pack what you will require there, to be forwarded by carrier; and spend to-morrow evening, if you like, with Aunt Dorothy. One of us will drive you over to-morrow afternoon."

"That will do, if Aunt Dorothy will have me for a single night; I must confess I do not like the idea of running away like a culprit. But, Aunt Rose, it is a

regular nuisance—I shall begin to wish there were no young men in the world; after this, I shall fight shy of all masculine creatures between sixteen and forty-five. How could Louis be so foolish!"

"In what did his foolishness consist?"

"In his wanting *me* for a wife. He might have known by this time that I was not a marrying woman; he might also have discovered that he and I were not in the least suited. Nothing would induce me to marry a foreigner."

"Louis is wonderfully English in all his ways, and he is a Protestant and a true Christian. It strikes me, Hilda, that you may go farther and fare worse."

"Possibly. But I am not going farther in the direction of marriage. I am going to be the happiest, most useful old maid that ever lived; I shall be '*Auntie*' to all your grandchildren, and in years to come—that is, if I live—I shall be in request in every house where Arnisons hold sway. If only I might never hear any more about marrying!"

"I shall never urge it upon you, Hilda," replied Mrs. Arnison, a little pensively; she was thinking how crookedly, to all appearance, things in this world would go. If only Louis had had the sense to care for Flossie, and bestow on Hilda that brotherly regard which so perfectly contented her, how convenient it would have been! Yet so it ever is, one woman coolly rejects as a bore and an encumbrance the affection that another would thankfully accept as precious treasure. "But," continued she, "does Louis fully understand that his suit is hopeless?"

"I think I made Madame Michaud understand so much."

"Louis will never take his dismissal second-hand, if I know anything of him."

"In that case, I had better make good my retreat, and return immediately with Aunt Dorothy."

"And I say, my dear, you had better not! Louis, I think, has a right to an answer from your own lips. It will also simplify matters very much; he will know you are in earnest, and accept your decision as final. Louis is too English in all his ideas to tolerate this courting by

proxy ; he will ask you a plain question, and you must give him a plain, though kindly, answer. Remember, my dear, when a man asks a girl to be his wife, and earnestly desires to win her, he does her as much honour as lies in his power ; and when the man is a good, true-hearted man, like our Louis, he deserves all consideration. It is a mistake to imagine that a woman owes nothing in this particular ; and I am sure you are no coquette, Hilda dear ! ”

“ No, indeed ! I do think I am not guilty of that folly, Aunt Rose. I should be ashamed of myself if I liked to vex or tease any man. A coquette is a most despicable character ; and I must confess I have very little sympathy with those young ladies in stories who don’t know their own minds ; they always make me think of that sweet damsel whose charms Bon Gaultier celebrates :—

“ ‘ He said that I was proud, mother, that I looked for rank and gold ;

He said I did not love him—he said my words were cold ;

He said I kept him off and on, in hopes of higher game ;

And it may be that I did, mother—but who hasn’t done the same ? ’ ”

“ ‘ I did not know my heart, mother—I know it now too late ;
I thought that I without a pang could wed some nobler mate ;
But no nobler suitor sought me, and he has taken wing,
And my heart is gone, and I am left—a lone and blighted thing.’ ”

At which there was a little burst of laughter from both the elder ladies ; Hilda had recited the lines with so much humour. Just at this point Madame Michaud entered the room, vigorously rubbing her nose, a certain sign of her vexation ; she heard the dying cadence of the laugh, and felt injured, especially when she perceived who the offenders were. Here was she negotiating an affair of the gravest importance, and there were they—the three women to whom she had appealed—behaving with all possible frivolity ! Madame’s sensibilities were shocked ; she looked quietly displeased.

“ I beg your pardon, Rose,” she said, coldly addressing Mrs. Arnison. “ I am sorry to interrupt your entertainment, but I came to ask you to convey a message to

Mademoiselle Hilda, which, perhaps, you will now permit me to deliver in person?"

"Most certainly. We do not stand upon so much ceremony here, Josephine, *mon amie*!"

"Then it is I, Mademoiselle, who wish to tell to you in the presence of these ladies that my foolish Louis will take his denial from no one but yourself. It is most indecorous, I admit, but he will have his own way. If he were in France, he says, demanding the hand of a French demoiselle, he would do as France does; but, living in England, he will follow the English fashion and do his courting for himself. Bah! it is altogether out of order! But you have a proverb, if I mistake not, which says, 'A wilful man will have his way'—and so it is! Will you, then, Mademoiselle Hilda, permit to my son a private audience?"

"If he asks it, certainly. It will be better in every way."

"Where shall he wait upon you?"

"Where is he now?"

"In the orchard walking to and fro, as one who cannot rest! Neither dye-house nor office has seen him to-day. I pray you, Mees Hilda, keep him not in suspense; shall he come here to receive his sentence?"

"I would rather go to him; I can talk more freely in the open air."

"But you must not go to him. Pardon me, it is most unfit."

And Madame Michaud turned to Mrs. Arnison and Mrs. Dorothy in appeal. But ere she could gather their opinion Hilda was gone. She felt very much like a person who has an appointment with his dentist, and wisely resolves not to hesitate; it is well to endure the inevitable pang without delay. Louis started when he saw her, between the branches, coming towards him. Surely, if she would do him so much grace, she could not be as resolute as his mother believed. But the first glance told him that his hope was vain, and her first words sealed his fate. Still he pleaded, "If you knew me better, Hilda, you *might* come to care for me?"

"Not as you wish me to care, Louis. I do care for you; I had begun to think how pleasant it must be to

have a brother of my own ; I am so much grieved that our free and happy intercourse must cease."

"And *must* it, Hilda ? "

"Just at present it will only trouble you to see much of me ; I am going to Bradenshope for a few days."

"And you are sure you cannot relent ? you will not give me a chance ? I do not ask for an immediate engagement. I only beg to be allowed to *hope* that some day I may win you."

"I could not encourage such a hope, knowing that it would be vain. Dear Louis, be sure I appreciate your affection, but because I cannot now—or ever—return it, I am resolute. You will thank me in the future, when you have found the right woman. I am sorry to vex you, but I should vex you worse, by-and-by, if I took any other course."

"One word, Hilda ; I know I ought not to ask it, but if I might just inquire, is there any one else——?"

"No one ! I have not the ghost of a lover—except yourself—and I devoutly pray that from this moment you may cease to be one."

"Which one—the ghost or the lover ? "

"Ah ! you jest ; that comforts me a little. Now I must leave you, for I have much to do."

"And there was no one in the past that——?"

But Hilda interrupted him : "There are no birds in last year's nests." And even as she spoke she turned and took her way towards the house.

"She is a noble creature," he thought, "and well worth a man's winning. I will not despair ; she may yet be mine. It was presumptuous of me to think she could so easily be won—she ! a flower that the proudest might be proud to pluck for his own wearing. I made a mistake when I let my mother speak for me ; I understand her better now—a man must gather an *English* rosebud for himself. I always thought I would have an English wife."

She went her way thinking : "I am glad it is over ; I hope he quite understands. I almost wish I *could* love him. How hard, how bitter it must be when one has to say 'No' from duty only ; when one *does* care, but dare

not confess it ; when love, *true love* that is, must take part against itself for dear right's sake ! Ah ! that must be hard indeed to bear. Thank God ! such trial is not mine. How I wish Louis would love Flossie ; at least, I think I wish it—I *think* I do."

Several hours later, as Hilda was busy with her packing, Flossie came in with "So you really are going to Bradenshope, Hilda ?"

"I really am. I wanted to go as soon as I had read Miss Braden's letter ; but I could say nothing till I had consulted Aunt Dorothy. You see, it is full seven months since I left the Grey House, which really is my home, and I was so afraid of seeming to make a convenience of Aunt Dorothy."

"The Blue House is as much your home as the other, I hope."

"It is very nice of you to say so, and never shall I forget the kindness—more than kindness, the true affection—I have found here ; but I came first to Aunt Dorothy, and, all things considered, I think I owe her somewhat of the deference and respect I should pay to my own mother if she were living."

"I am glad you decided to go, for I am sure you will have what the Americans call 'a good time' at Bradenshope ; it is such a charming place in summer, and Lady Braden is such a dear—all girls are fond of her. Christina and I were never very intimate, but I imagine you and she will pull together quite well. You seemed to have a great deal to say to each other at Alice's wedding."

"I think we had ; we talked, perhaps, too much, being somehow thrown together, and we found that we agreed wonderfully on most subjects. But, Flossie, do tell me—you know the Bradens and their friends—how many and what dresses shall I take with me ?"

"Just two or three, besides the one you wear ; but let them be nice ones, the best you have. It will be a quiet visit ; the Bradens have given no entertainment since Paul died."

"What is the history and mystery of this unfortunate Paul ?"

"I don't quite know. Alice knows, but she would not

say much about it when I questioned her. One thing is sure, he died by his own hand—I fancy it was poison! And after his death all sorts of misdemeanours came to light; for one thing, he had gambled, and he was awfully in debt. Sir Paul, of course, paid every creditor, and there was an inquest, too, and people said it was a ‘packed jury’ that pronounced the verdict, for they brought it in ‘accidental death,’ or ‘death by misadventure,’ or ‘died by the visitation of God,’ or something of that sort. But just at that time we saw none of the newspapers; they were all kept at the Works, and we could not find out much from casual conversation, for one morning—it was the day of the funeral I found afterwards—papa told us all to stay a minute when prayers were over, servants as well, and then he said that our dear friends, the Bradens, were in great trouble; that we could only help them by remembering them in our prayers, and asking that they might be comforted and strengthened according to their need; and that he hoped no one in his house would join in any idle talk about them. They were sorely smitten, he said, and we should respect their deep grief and not add to their affliction by helping to circulate injurious reports.”

“And were there injurious reports about?”

“Well! to say that a man has committed suicide is undoubtedly an injurious report; but even worse things were rumoured, for, of course, some whispers did reach our ears; it was said that poor Paul had dishonoured the name of Braden—a name that had been, till that hour, absolutely stainless! That he had not only gambled and borrowed money, and done all sorts of things that no Braden had ever done before, but committed *forgery*! That, however, I don’t believe; and yet Paul Braden was frightfully weak, though anybody more amiable, more generous, more tender-hearted, you will scarcely find. I recollect long ago when he got into some scrape at Cambridge—he fell in with a fast set, you know—papa saying to mamma in my hearing, though they did not think I listened, ‘That poor Paul has no moral backbone whatever, and I am afraid he will never stand upright when any sort of temptation besets him.’ And mamma shook

her head, and said she feared he would be a trouble to himself and to his parents, and that it was a mistake to have sent him to that college, where he would be sure to find loose and unprincipled companions. He left Cambridge rather abruptly, and I have heard since that something was whispered about his being *rusticated* by the University authorities. Then he went to Germany with a tutor, and there was an *esclandre* of some sort while he was abroad. When he came back he took to art, and began to paint pictures ! You will never see any of them at Bradenshope, they are kept scrupulously out of sight. It was considered that he really had no small amount of genius, but all were agreed that he would never bring anything to perfection—he was so restless and lazy, and uncertain as the winds. Besides, Sir Paul did not care that he should be an artist, for his studies led him into a good deal of Bohemianism, which was not likely to improve him in the very respects most needed. Nor was it in the fitness of things that the heir of Bradenshope should identify himself with a profession so entirely unallied to the duties which, as eldest son, would naturally devolve upon him, even in his father's lifetime."

"It must have been very trying to his father and mother."

"Very. And it was worse still when Paul—who had a fiery temper of his own—took offence I don't know at what, and suddenly withdrew, leaving only a note upon his dressing-table—just like a stupid girl eloping—to say that he had gone abroad in order the more fully to study art, to which he had determined to devote himself, and that he should not ask his father for any money, but maintain himself by the sale of his pictures, which already commanded a good price."

"How very distressing to his family!"

"They were very much concerned, of course ; but they could do nothing ; Paul was of age, and the estates were fully entailed. They could only hope he would come back when he was tired of playing the artist and the adventurer ; his father was quite sure he possessed neither the energy nor the endurance necessary to permanent success, and he thought that in a few months, at latest,

he would return to appreciate and to enjoy his rightful position as heir of Bradenshope, a sadder and a wiser man. Papa quite agreed with Sir Paul in the course he was taking ; he, too, believed that the young man would be all the better for a little privation and difficulty, that he should be left to find out that a good deal of the homage paid to him and the allowances made for him were due, not to the artist, Paul Braden, but to the heir of Bradenshope ! However, nothing much was heard of him—though he wrote queer, rambling letters sometimes, now from one Italian city, now from another—till at length his father became excessively uneasy, and was on the point of sending some one over to Florence—his last address—in search of him, when he suddenly returned home, and declared that he was tired of a roving life, and had resolved finally to take up his abode on his own ancestral inheritance. That was in the spring of the year before last—I saw very little of him, for I was in Paris all the summer with the Michauds ; but I heard that Bradenshope had been unusually gay, and that both Sir Paul and Lady Braden were most anxious that their eldest son should marry, and settle down at Arnheim Towers, which is both the dower house and the home of the heir of the Bradens while his father lives. The present Sir Paul and his wife resided at Arnheim Towers some years after their marriage, the last baronet being still alive. Well ! that is all I have to tell. I came home in September, and in October the catastrophe, whatever it was, occurred. Paul Braden *died*, without any previous illness, and was buried by torchlight, as all the Bradens are, in the family vault of the old unused and half-ruined church at Bradenshope-Arnheim. And that, Hilda, is all I know ; except that I did hear something which I was not intended to hear—something about a wicked Italian woman, who was the principal cause of poor Paul's ruin."

"I am glad I know so much, because I shall not be likely to make involuntary blunders, or stumble upon painful subjects. And, indeed, Flossie, that sad story of gambling—and worse!—reminds me so much of poor papa, that I should never think of opening my lips on such a

theme. No, I should not think there will be many visitors at Bradenshope; Miss Braden distinctly says that I am asked to join them *en famille*."

Suddenly Flossie disappeared, but soon returned with a cardboard box, which she opened, saying, "It seems to me, Hilda, that you are rather short of *little* fineries, such as the Braden girls always wear—nice laces, pretty frills, ribbons, &c. Take some of mine—the best of them, please. I shall not go out much while I am at York."

"Oh, Flossie! how dear and good of you! But I don't need them, really I don't; and I had rather not appear any grander than I am. I have one beautiful set, you know—the lovely old *Point* that was poor mamma's! And there is the Honiton aunt gave me for the wedding! Indeed, I shall do very well, Flossie dear."

"Please take something of mine, and when you wear it think of me; but don't remember how cross I have been with you for days past."

"I was not sure that it was with me you were vexed."

"Not with you exclusively, but very much so. I had a fit of naughtiness, Hilda; but mamma has been talking to me, and I am ashamed of myself. I must say just one thing—I know why Madame Michaud drove over to the Grey House so soon after breakfast, and—I hope you will be happy."

"I am going to be happy, I hope; but my happiness has nothing, and will have nothing, to do with Madame Michaud."

"I thought—in fact, I know—that she went to demand your hand, French fashion, for her son!"

"And so she did. But my hand is my own, and I mean to keep it—probably for life."

"Have you then rejected Louis?"

"I have. But it was meant to be a dead secret, Flossie; no one is to know! Yes, I have refused him decidedly. I like him very much. I wish he were my brother, but that is all. Nothing could induce me to marry him, and all in good time he will find out how right I was, and be glad that he is free to make a wiser choice."

Florence gave her cousin a vehement hug and a kiss, but she did not further betray herself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

QUINT HOURS.

" Few rightly estimate the worth
Of joys that spring and fade on earth ;
They are not weeds we should despise,
They are not fruits of Paradise ;
But wild flowers in the pilgrim's way,
That cheer yet not protract his stay ;
Which he dare not too fondly clasp,
Lest they should perish in his grasp—
And yet may view and wisely love,
As proofs and types of joys above."

"WHAT a lovely place ! what an Eden !" cried Hilda, as she drove across Bradenshope Park on a beautiful mid-summer afternoon. It must have been extremely hot in the open, but the road—a sort of green by-road, which was much the shortest way from the Grey House side of Endlestone—was completely overshadowed by trees, and lay for the most part over soft elastic turf ; while from the great slopes at several miles' distance came a cool light breeze, such as blows in the sultriest summer days on the sunny mountain sides, and from out the deep, silent ravines of the "everlasting hills."

The part of the park which Hilda traversed that afternoon was almost a forest—ancient oaks, giant horse-chestnuts, veteran sycamores, and lordly beeches spread their great arms and waved their leafy boughs on every side. Underneath was a sea of fern and moss and wild flowers, and all the rich undergrowth of the untrodden woodland. Here and there were grey silvery rocks and splinters of rocks, or huge boulders covered with lovely-tinted lichens and golden cup-mosses, and hung with garlands of the clear, coral-stemmed, shining cranesbill, while beyond rose a line of perpendicular cliffs, broken only by natural grassy terraces, and clothed with creeping ivy and young saplings, self-planted in the crevices of the fretted limestone. Once

they crossed a shallow, busy brook, babbling as it went, and from afar came the dull roar of the waterfall tumbling from rock to rock with a sound like distant thunder. Then they came to quiet glades, where the timid deer were feeding, and ever and anon they caught through the over-sweeping branches long vistas of umbrageous avenues, and wide stretches of rich grazing land, where the sleek cows and the wonderful white oxen of Bradenshawe peacefully fed, and chewed the cud in calm complacency.

Theodore was Hilda's charioteer, and as they drove rather slowly through the last wood into one of the main roads of the park, he replied:—"An Eden? Yes; I believe you, rather; I should not mind being Walter Braden, heir to these broad lands, and to I don't know how many thousands a-year! The old gentleman must be pretty rich, I should fancy, for the Bradens were always counted wealthy, and they live very quietly for magnates of the county, though they do say poor Paul's debts were something overwhelming, and his father paid them straight down, every farthing! Sir Paul's a brick, you know!—all the Bradens are bricks—girls and all. What a fool young Paul was to get into such wretched scrapes; and having got into them, what a coward not to face them and make the best of it!"

"Hush, hush, Theo! this poor Paul is dead—let him rest in peace. It is ungenerous to upbraid the dead, who cannot justify themselves."

"Well, perhaps it is. It is not good form, anyhow—like flinging a stone at a dead dog. And there's the old proverb, '*De mortuis nil nisi bonum!*'—that means, 'Say nothing but good of the dead.' I suppose you don't know Latin?"

"So little that I may say I know nothing; I was supposed to learn it in the schoolroom, and I do recollect that there are five declensions, and I could once go creditably through the first and second. Never mind that; I heard something of Paul Braden's story the other day, and I feel very sorry for him."

"I don't suppose you heard the rights of it; there are some parts of it one would not care for a girl to hear."

"Then I should say those parts of the story would not

be good for a boy to hear," replied Hilda, infinitely amused at her young cousin's manly assumptions.

"Any way, Hilda, I am not going to tell you them."

"Of course not; though it is a great pity a lad like you should have heard anything that you cannot fitly repeat to us girls."

"Girls are girls, my dear, and boys are boys, and have to be men."

"Really! you don't say so? But we will not, I think, talk any more about this poor Paul; I have just remembered that your father did not wish any of his family to gossip on the subject, and here we are in sight of the house."

"Yes; it's a fine old place. Do you know, Walter, as second son, would have inherited not more than a few hundreds a year? I call it a burning shame this entailing of estates, and this unequal distribution of property. If ever I am in Parliament, I mean to bring in a Bill for abolishing what's called the law of primogeniture; in fact, I am for abolishing and disestablishing right and left."

"What a dreadful Radical you must be!"

"Thank you for the compliment. Only men who have something in them go in for radical reform. It's milk-sops and pert sprigs of aristocracy and *parvenus*, who are all for rank Conservatism. What are you, Cousin Hilda, Liberal or Conservative?"

"I am neither, I think. I used to suppose I was what you style a 'rank Conservative,' because most of the people I knew were ultra-Tories."

"Of course they were! The drones are always Conservatives or Tories—which you will, there is no real difference—and small blame to them. It's very nice, of course, to have one's honey ready made, and to have nothing to do but buzz about and eat what the busy bees have provided. I'd rather be a bee, though."

"Bees sting, as well as work."

"And a good thing they do; the drones would eat them out of house and home if they didn't. I say, Hilda, isn't my tie all twisted? and oh! do hold the reins; I have forgotten to put on my proper driving-gloves, and they can see us from the windows."

"They will see you making an open-air toilet."

"No they won't; we are not close enough for that, and there's a sweep among the laurels just before us. I say now! what magnificent fuchsias. If you are fond of flowers you will have a treat here, for Sir Paul's head gardener is at the tip-top of his trade!—I beg his pardon! I believe he considers himself a horticulturist, and talks of his 'profession.' But, anyhow, you will get a bouquet every day, and if you talk a little botany to the old Scotchman, I dare say he will give you two. They were to have had the Croxton Horticultural Show here last year, and old Fraser meant it to be the finest show of the century; but, of course, the trouble about Paul put an end to everything, and Fraser couldn't even compete. After all, it was held at Temple Towerby, quite an out-of-the-way place, right under the big fells yonder. I say! these ponies pull one's hands off; they know the Bradenshope stables. Here we are."

And there was Sir Paul, ready to assist his fair guest to alight. "Welcome to Bradenshope, Miss Capel," was his salutation. He was not yet sixty, but the snows of more than seventy winters might have fallen upon his head, so silver-white were his hair and his long beard, and so many were the wrinkles that grief—not time—had carved upon his kindly face. "And you have had a beautiful drive, my dear," he continued; "we are looking our best at Bradenshope this splendid summer-weather. Did you come by what we call the green-road?"

"I believe I did; it was green enough, and the woods were lovely. I longed to get out and gather some of the wild flowers I saw. How delightful everything is!"

"You see us at our best, though to my mind the park and our mountains are beautiful at every season; where are the girls, I wonder?"

"Here am I papa," said Agnes, coming forward a little shyly. She was a fair, slim girl, with the lovely pleading eyes of a gazelle, a sweet expression, and a complexion delicate as the tint of a wild rose. Behind her came Emily, so completely her counterpart, that Hilda was not for the moment very sure which was the elder and which the younger of the sisters. Their height was precisely

the same, and even their voices had the same soft, musical inflection.

"But where is Christina?"

"She will be here directly, papa; she is just seeing old Molly, and giving her some balsam for her grandchild's burn. Will you not come to the drawing-room, Miss Capel, and take a cup of tea before you dress for dinner?"

Hilda at once assented, and was received in kind, motherly fashion by Lady Braden, who, like her husband, looked much older than she really was. The drawing-room—not the state drawing-room, which was very little used—was bright with flowers and ferns, and abounding with those little prettinesses which only women of refined taste know how to collect and to assimilate. Emily took Hilda's hat and sunshade, Agnes poured out the tea, and then Christina entered with Theodore, who had seen his ponies unharnessed. Sir Paul had asked him to stay to dinner, and drive home in the cool of the evening, and Theo, nothing loth, consented; he had a sort of boyish *penchant* for Emily Braden, who was full two years older than himself.

Afterwards Christina took Hilda upstairs to her room, which was adjoining her own—a circumstance that privately rejoiced Miss Capel, who did not care that reminiscences of the Bradenshopes ghosts should revisit her too vividly in the night seasons.

"Your luggage came this morning by the carrier," said Christina; "shall I help you to unpack what you will require immediately? What sort of dinner-toilet should you make? The simplest possible; there is no one besides ourselves, and we seldom 'dress' in the regular acceptation of the word. I hope you will not be dull; we are going to make you entirely one of ourselves."

"I do not think there is much fear of my being dull here; and I quite understood that we should be very quiet. Indeed, had it been otherwise, I could scarcely have accepted the invitation, for my wardrobe includes only very simple dresses; besides, I am still in mourning, though I did sport a little colour at our wedding the other day."

"You can scarcely be simpler than ourselves. Yes, that nice black silk with those soft ruffles, and the ivory brooch

and bracelets, will do charmingly. And you must have a white rose in your hair ; I shall tell Fraser to keep you well supplied with white flowers. We are more than usually alone just now, for Walter has gone to town on business, and I am afraid he will not be back till next week."

"Without any depreciation of Mr. Braden's society, I am sure I shall be quite content with yours and your sisters'," returned Hilda, brightly. And then a bell sounding through the passages, Christina remembered that she, too, had to perform her toilet, and that it behoved her to make all the haste she could, punctuality being accounted as one of the cardinal virtues by the heads of the house, and especially by Sir Paul, who always maintained that a certain formality was expedient, and even essential, in the family circle, in order that people should properly respect themselves and each other.

When Hilda retired to her chamber that night, she wondered to think how little strangeness she felt among these new friends ; how little stiffness and yet how much propriety existed among them, and how completely this stately mansion was a *home* ! Lady Braden and her daughters evidently understood the art of making their house a home in all the sweetest and fullest senses of the term—an art, which probably is to some extent a gift, so many persons striving and striving to produce the home-effect, without at all succeeding. When she had put on her dressing-gown, and let down her hair, she threw open one of her windows, which all looked across the woodlands of the park straight into the bosom of the hills. Their outline here was somewhat different from what it was at Endlestone ; hills and mountains are like some of our best friends—ever the same in themselves, ever at their post, yet presenting themselves continually in fresh phases and new aspects as the years roll on.

There was no moon, but the purple summer twilight still brooded over the solemn woods, and there was a pale gold streak yet lingering in the west. From below rose the scent of flowers ; Hilda could have stretched out her hand and gathered a cluster of lovely Boursault roses, and even the tall, fragrant white lilies seemed not very far

beneath her grasp. On the still night-air came the faint tinkling of a distant sheep bell, and the monotonous dull roar of the waterfall sounded fuller and louder than in the daytime.

"It is almost too sweet and fair," said Hilda to herself, as a wakeful bird twittered among the roses, and a glow-worm lighted his tiny lamp on one of the green banks that skirted the dewless lawn. "It is a veritable Eden! And yet sorrow and death have entered here, and their shadow still rests upon the place, for all its wealth of natural loveliness, and in spite of the charm of its kindly, pleasant inhabitants. Must 'the trail of the serpent' betray itself wherever one goes? Has every family its hidden skeleton? I begin to think it must be so. Well! in such a world, I suppose one ought to expect it, for where sin is there must be grief and pain, and truly 'the wages of sin is death.' Will the time ever come when the whole world shall be subject to Christ? I think it must, for it is *written* that He shall reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet. Also, it seems to be, that if Christ do not conquer, the devil will, and that is too dreadful to think of, because the ultimate triumph of evil over good would prove that Satan was stronger than God, and the kingdom of Christ only a poor minority! We need not be afraid of that, however, for we know a day *will* surely come when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and *He shall reign for ever and ever.*"

And then Hilda's mind flew back to the past—to that time last year, when she had deemed herself so happy, so free from care, when this world's pleasures satisfied her fully, when she was content to feed on ashes, nor even guessed the sweetness of the 'angels' food,' that was now her portion. Yes, that very night twelve months—how well she remembered it!—she had been at what was styled "the most successful ball of the season," a fairy land of flowers and lamps and mimic fountains, and brilliant forms moving to measured music, sweet as it was joyous, and inspiriting as it was glad. All night long those Belgravian roses heard

"The flute, violin, bassoon ; "

all night long the florist's lily-bells and the graceful ferns trembled

"To the dancers dancing in tune."

And who so gay—so carelessly gay—as Hilda, who that night had been called "Queen-lily and rose in one"? And yet even then were the clouds gathering; even then was the low thunder pealing in the far distance, across the seas; even then the bolt was ready to fall, while she saw only the soft, glittering lights, and heard naught but the sounds of the festival.

Not many days, and the tempest broke in all its fury; the flowers of life were faded; there was no more sound of merriment, no more laughter; no more pleasant hopes and dreams, while friend and lover stood aloof. All was so dark—*so dark!* Not a ray pierced the gloom, not a star shone through the blackness of the wild, drear night. There was no rift in all the rolling clouds that shut out sun, moon, and planets from her sight. All was gone, as it seemed, for ever—all that made the world so fair and life so beautiful.

"Yet, for all that," said Hilda, "I would not go back to those careless, idle days of outward prosperity for aught that could be offered. Even the memory of those by-gone hours is losing much of its pain. Oh! God has been very good to me—*so good!* and I—I murmured against Him, and shut my heart against Him. I was like a foolish, foward child, that rebels against a loving parent because of some enforced discipline—that is for its future benefit. And God forgave me my folly and my sin, and let me taste of a joy so pure and sweet, that all pleasures of the past became as nothing. I wonder whether my coming here will be productive of any event? I am sure I shall like them all, especially Christina, and I feel that it is quite a stroke of good luck Mr. Braden being away; I do like a house so much better when there are no young men in it. Sir Paul is a dear old gentleman, and I may fall in love with him as much as I choose. Next to Uncle Arnison, I like him better than any man-creature I ever met. Well, I think I had better go to bed, or I shall be lazy in the morning, and they keep early hours here, I remember."

And then Hilda, with one glance at the lovely, dim landscape, quietly shut down her window, and finished her night-toilet.

The next day was Saturday, and the young people spent some hours before luncheon in the woods nearest the house. In the afternoon they all sat together reading, working, and singing, and then came dressing time, and dinner, and then a long pleasant evening chiefly passed in the gardens and shrubberies, which Theodore had not praised at all too much. But just as it was growing a little dusk, Sir Paul came out, and asked Hilda if she had seen the lily-pool. She had not, though Christina had spoken of taking her there, and Sir Paul said, "Let us go there now; there is plenty of light, and will be for the next half-hour. Come, Chrissie!"

"I am wanted in the house," replied Miss Braden; "you must be contented with Hilda for a companion. Agnes and Emily are still on the croquet-ground, knocking about their balls—shall I call them?"

"By no means," was her father's answer. "Miss Capel and I can very well amuse each other, but if you fall in with the girls, tell them I shall expect that '*Lucia*' duet presently, when the lamps are lighted. Now, Miss Capel, this way, through the kitchen gardens."

It was not a long walk; ten minutes brought them to the lily-pool, which lay like a large pure sapphire in a little green dell within the park. The lilies, however, were all closed, and the swans had gone to their sleeping-place among the reeds. On one side the trees grew down close to the water's edge; on the other, they receded in the shape of an amphitheatre, leaving a broad margin of soft, emerald-like turf between them and the placid lake. The very spirit of repose seemed brooding over earth and sky.

Hilda felt as if she had reached some calm resting-place, where she might linger awhile in perfect confidence and peace, gathering strength and wisdom for all the troubles and changes that *might* befall her in the time to come. Sir Paul led her to a bench in the middle of the amphitheatre, and sat down by her side. "You need not fear the damp," he said; "there is a plank, you per-

ceive, under your feet, and there is not the slightest mist or chill rising from the water. I do not know when we have had such a summer—so hot, and dry, and clear; scarcely like an English summer. And, generally speaking, our northern autumns outshine our summers, which are too often late, and given to over-much weeping. It has not rained for more than a fortnight, I think?"

"It is full three weeks since that slight thunderstorm that we so much feared might unsettle the weather for Alice's wedding-day. However, it cleared the air, that was rather too sultry for comfort, and it has been lovely ever since."

"That is just as it is often, in other things than disturbances of the atmosphere. The very occurrences that we fear will blight our happiness, and cloud our skies, turn out to be beneficial in a way we never expected, only it is so hard to rejoice in the storm and in the darkness. Oh, for more faith!"

"I suppose one's faith increases and strengthens as one grows older—that is, if one is striving to live one's life right Christianly?"

"It ought to increase, my dear. It ought to strengthen, to deepen, and widen with every year's experience of our Father's love and kindness; but, alas! we are froward children at best, and our lessons are difficult to learn. Or, rather, it is that we are such inapt pupils, that we fail continually to catch the meaning of our tasks, which are all written in cipher. Ah! we are blind alike in joy and in sorrow—wilfully blind, too often; and yet God bears with us, and blesses us all the time. And—and, the heart knoweth its own bitterness! and for some griefs there is no earthly remedy; it only remains to wait till the end, when all will be made clear and plain."

"Till the end of life?"

"Till the end of this life, which more and more I feel to be but a little span—a mere interval between the two eternities, if I may so speak."

"The *two* eternities?" asked Hilda, puzzled.

"The two which are but one. That which lies behind, and which is to the full as vast, as illimitable, and as

mysterious as that which lies before us. Time is but a fragment of eternity."

"There is something awful, though, in the thought of eternity!—that '*for ever and ever*' without beginning and without end!"

"There is always something awful in the mysterious and unknown, the utterly incomprehensible, which no mortal mind can ever hope to fathom. And yet it is only in the hope of eternity that the soul of man can actually rejoice; for eternity and God are one and the same thing. The bare idea of an eternity which does not comprehend God is too horrible to sustain, even for a moment."

"And yet in this life how content people are to live without God; how willing to enjoy all rich gifts, never thinking of the Giver. Only a year ago I cared nothing for God. I believed in His existence because I had been brought up to profess, at least, outwardly, the Christian faith; but except that so I was nearer the light, I might as well have believed in Mahomet."

"And yet God was there, in your life, all around you, and about you, speaking to you, and you knew it not!"

"I have felt that since, and wondered at God's great patience—the patience that bears, and waits and waits year after year—ay, century after century. And we!—we are such poor, weak creatures, so full of ourselves and of our folly."

"And yet God made us. We are His creatures, and we are dear to Him. Let that comfort us when we despond, and inspire us when we are at our feeblest. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is *our* God, *our* Father, and in Him and by Him we are blessed for evermore. As for the great shadowy beyond, we can only leave it where it is safe enough—in *His* hands. There our present is secure, and there must our future rest; for it is His good pleasure to draw to Himself the souls that He has created."

"And it is written—'I, if I be lifted up, will draw *all* men unto Me.'"

"Even so. But how slow are men to come! How unwilling to be drawn into the embrace of infinite and perfect Love!"

Then they walked on, for in spite of the dry, warm air, there was certainly a cool breeze from the water, and Sir Paul was no longer a young man, full of health and vigour. When they reached home, the pale stars were shining in the clear nightfall sky, and the crimson and purple lights had faded from the mountain-tops. And so those peaceful days glided on, calm, gravely happy, uneventful, and yet not monotonous. Never had Hilda been more completely happy than now ; and she half-wondered when there would be a change. She resolved, however, to dismiss every anxiety from her mind, and take thankfully the sweet rest that Bradenshope offered ; she was glad that Sir Paul was reminded by her of that fair young sister whom he had loved so well. She was glad that Christina had wished for her as a friend. She was glad when she found that she could sometimes cheer the settled sadness of gentle Lady Braden ; and, lastly, she was very, very glad that there were no other visitors in the house ! And Sunday came and went, and on Monday they lunched on a lonely mountain-side that looked about a mile distant from Bradenshope, but was really more than twelve miles from the lodge gates, and the weather was still dry and warm and clear—the perfection of an English midsummer. On Tuesday morning Christina received a letter from her brother—he would be at home that evening in time for dinner, and he was bringing Philip Harwood with him.

"And now," thought Hilda, regretfully, "this quiet, delightful, restful time is over ! I do wish it could have lasted a little longer."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ZINGARA.

"Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate."

"WALTER comes home to-day!" seemed to be the universal cry at Bradenshope on that Tuesday morning. Sir Paul could not read his newspaper, but fidgeted about giving directions to the gardeners, who were told that the lawns and beds must be in perfect order, because Mr. Braden was expected back that evening; Lady Braden held private consultations with Mrs. Maxwell; Christina was busy arranging her brother's books, and Agnes and Emily were energetically practising his favourite duets on the old schoolroom piano. Hilda, though she had a charming new book, fresh from Mudie's, felt herself just a little ruffled at the general disturbance of the quiet household, which hitherto had seemed to be secretly worked by some wonderful, unseen machinery. "I do believe," she had written to Aunt Dorothy, "that somebody—Mrs. Maxwell, of course—winds the household up, like a kitchen-clock, every morning between five and six, and it goes steadily, with scarce a second's variation, till the same hour next day, when the same process is repeated, and so on, and so on, as surely as the sun gets up, so faultless is the *régime*, so sure and silent the invisible works, which produce, as a matter of course, the most desirable results. If, by some extraordinary freak of fortune, I should ever become mistress of such a place as Bradenshope—which supposition, by the way, is about equal to that of the cat in the fable, who said, 'If ever I become a lioness,' &c.—I will bribe Mrs. Maxwell to disclose to me her marvellous method of noiseless, viewless, most efficient housekeeping! Though I am not at all sure but that Lady Braden has something to do with it; I sometimes fancy she is more 'behind the scenes' than, on first appearances, one would give her credit for being. Anyhow, with all her gentle sadness, with all her air of repose and dignified *dolce far*

niente, she makes an excellent *châtelaine*! Well, auntie, though the cat is scarcely likely to develop into a lioness, she may catch mice respectably; though whether the mice think the cat's behaviour respectable is quite another question! And I, who shall certainly never be a *grande dame* at the head of a noble mansion, may yet, some day, when I am quite elderly, have a wee, snug house of my own; and then, won't I try in a small way to rival Mrs. Maxwell and her mistress. I have an immense respect for successful housekeeping, whether it be in a castle, or in a cottage, or in a substantial middle-class residence, like the Blue House. I think every woman should be *queen*—a working queen, I mean—in her own house! A house, like a kingdom, must be wisely governed, or rebellion is imminent, and revolution—which, I suppose, is simply praiseworthy and successful rebellion—not far off. I took up a volume of sermons the other day—they were by Robertson, of Brighton—and I read these words, which I am sure you will thoroughly endorse:—‘The glory of womanhood is no common glory; it is that of unsensualising coarse and common things, the objects of mere sense, meat, and drink, and household cares, elevating them, by the spirit in which she ministers them, into something transfigured and sublime.’ This simple sentence gave me plenty to think about. I don’t think I shall be disgusted next time I am relegated to the kitchen, as I was on that never-to-be-forgotten morning, when you set me to stir the lard-kettle.”

And now the unusual bustle rather annoyed Miss Capel; she could not help being sorry either, that the young men were expected that same evening. She felt as if lovely Bradenshope would be Bradenshope no longer; and yet, at the same time, she was vigorously scolding herself for her unconscionable selfishness. “I ought to be ashamed of myself,” she thought, when, after luncheon, she went to her own room. “I am actually cross, because the only son of the house is coming home, and his family are delighted to receive him—even after so brief absence! And really, he is very nice! I liked him when first I saw him, nearly three months ago, and he was quite charming at Alice’s wedding. Is it that I am

afraid he may follow that absurd Louis Michaud's example, and fall in love with me? I think not; I hope not; because that would be sheer vanity and the veriest folly. As if I, the dowerless Hilda Capel, with, alas! a sullied name, could ever be considered a match for the heir of Bradenshawe! I do wish Louis had let me alone, for I hate to have such thoughts in my mind. I shall always harbour suspicions of young men now; and how people would laugh at me if they guessed my—my, well, I dare say it would be called 'my silly vanity!' I wish Mr. Braden were only engaged. I wish one could wear some token—something like the crimson star on the pictures that are in the Academy when they are *not* on sale. And this Philip Harwood—what will he be like? Heigho! Hilda Capel, what an extremely foolish, senseless, altogether reprehensible state of mind you are in to-day! Had you not better go back to the Grey House and feed the pigs and learn to knit stockings and read Smith's 'Wealth of Nations,' or the 'Bridgwater Treatises'?"

Truth to tell, we cannot approve of our heroine's too self-conscious reflections. Her excuse must be that just then she nourished a morbid dread of anything approaching to a recurrence of what had driven her away from Endlestone, and she really and truly felt no inclination for the society of any gentleman under fifty—one who would naturally appear to a girl of nineteen so venerable as to be safely conversed with and innocently admired. And the worst of it was she could not sweep the cobwebs out of her brain by conversing with any sensible person, for she could scarcely explain herself ever so slightly to any of the family. And that was a pity, for it sometimes does one a world of good to speak out one's foolishness, get it well laughed at, and have done with it.

The weather, too, which had been so glorious, showed signs of breaking up. The wind was capricious; a fresh breeze began to blow, and the vanes pointed by turns to every quarter of the heavens; heavy clouds rolled up from the horizon—"bottom packs" the country folk in the North of England call them; there was a low sobbing and sighing in the woods; the far-off mountains showed

so distinctly and seemed so near at hand that one could see all the fissures and ravines which were invisible in ordinary conditions of the atmosphere. Sir Paul, who was credited with wonderful weather-wisdom, tapped the glass, shook his head, tapped again, and said, with the air of an oracle, "The mercury is falling—*steadily*."

"To think it should rain just as Walter is coming home," said Emily dolefully.

"And Philip Harwood has not been here these two years," observed Agnes quietly, with a half glance at her favourite sister. Philip Harwood was certainly a person of interest to these two girls; so at least Hilda, as a bystander and unconcerned observer, thought.

"Will there be tempest?" asked Agnes of her father, as if he actually were that mythical personage so often referred to as "clerk of the weather."

"I think not," was his reply; "but there certainly are, or have been, electrical disturbances in the south—perhaps on the Continent—and we may come in for the fringes of the storm. Don't fret, girls; our young men are not composed of soluble substances, and the dry and thirsty earth cries out for moisture. Even our well-cared-for lawns and terraces are looking parched and brown; a short spell of wet weather will not hurt the hay, and it will greatly benefit the gardens and the corn. Where is Hilda?"

Then Christina remembered she had been left very much to herself all that day, and finding that she had been missing since luncheon, went in search of her. But Hilda was not to be found; she had moped herself into a languid and depressed tone, for which, however, the state of the atmosphere was very largely responsible, Hilda being one of those persons who are so unlucky as to be most unpleasantly affected when there is, as we say, "thunder in the air." A certain weariness and irritability, a curious tension of the nerves, a disposition to melancholy, always seized upon her at these periods, accompanied, too, by headache more or less acute. As the sky grew greyer and the atmosphere heavier, these uncomfortable symptoms increased, and at length she resolved to put on her hat and go into the woods for a

solitary ramble. Open-air exercise always did her good, both mentally and physically.

It was pleasanter out of doors than in the house, or so Hilda thought. The grass was cool and soft under the umbrageous trees ; the odour of the pines was delicious, and the little scudding rabbits and the bright-eyed squirrels took away the sense of loneliness. It was not yet four o'clock, and dinner would not be served till seven. There was plenty of time to take a good long, leisurely ramble, and she would scarcely be missed, when every one seemed more or less occupied. She went on through the same woods which she had traversed in the pony-carriage a few days before ; then she turned into a by-path, intending not to stray far from the beaten track, but tempted on by the unusual beauty of the wild flowers—some of them rare specimens, and nearly all new to Hilda, as were also several most fragile-looking ferns growing in the crevices of the hoary limestone boulders. A little way further on she came suddenly out of the thicket on to a broad piece of fragrant thymy turf, and found herself at the head of the loveliest little glen she had ever seen, at the bottom of which, chattering over rock and pebble, flowed a silver ribbon of a brook, spanned by a rude stone bridge, the low parapet of which was completely mantled by common polypody, gold-green tufts of flowering stone-crop, and long, trailing sprays of the delicate, ivy-leaved toad flax. Hilda, of course, must cross the brook, and see what lay beyond. She went a few yards into a deep wood, where there were no scuttering rabbits nor climbing squirrels, no fairy buds and blossoms, and few ferns. The trees were so thick that the sky was completely shut out ; the gloom—which must be utter darkness long ere nightfall—and the dead silence of the place oppressed her. A little further on, and the eeriness of the surroundings quite daunted her ; a sudden fear of she knew not what took possession of her, and she turned abruptly to retrace her steps. Unhappily, the wood was crossed and recrossed by several paths, which forked off from the main one—if, indeed, there was any main road in this lone, sequestered spot—and quite easily Hilda took the wrong one, and soon discovered that she was

going deeper into the woodland instead of creeping from it. Again she turned back, but quickly grew bewildered, for she speedily found herself stopped by impenetrable thickets ; the next track she tried could only be serviceable to a squirrel, for it lead to the roots of an immense, gnarled, decaying oak. She made another endeavour, and yet another, with the same result. She began to feel seriously embarrassed and somewhat frightened. Not being country-bred, she was naturally scared at the complete solitude in which she was, as it were, imprisoned. She comforted herself, however, with the reflection that she was still within the boundaries of the park ; but she did not know that on that side there were no actual boundaries to separate the park from the great woods beyond—which were, indeed, the remains of a once mighty aboriginal forest, and which were included in the lordly domains of Bradenshawe. It was scarcely likely she would meet any evil-disposed persons, for such were only to be found occasionally on the high-roads which led from town to town, and through the principal villages ; nor had she ever heard of gipsies in the neighbourhood. As for poachers, if there were any, they would not hurt her ; her greatest danger was from the wild cattle, if she should stray into their precincts.

By-and-by she stopped, tired and baffled, to consider what she could do. She wished in vain for a little trinket compass hanging on her watch-chain ; but she had left her watch where it had been all the morning—in its pretty malachite house, on her dressing-table. She could not see the sky, and if she could it was sunless, and unless she got out into the open, it was impossible to guess in what direction she was going ; the question was how to escape from this labyrinth of squirrel tracks and interlacing boughs, and the day was wearing towards dinner-time.

She sat down on a mossy boulder, round which harts-tongue flourished luxuriantly, telling her that there was water not far off ; she was so nervous and weary she could have cried. She looked around her, and then she heard the plaintive note of the wood-pigeon—a weird and dismal sound to listen to when one is sad and solitary !

Close by, almost at her feet, lay a rusty vermin-trap—it was set, and might have caught her, had she chanced to tread upon it, almost covered as it was by rank grass and weeds; the sight of this ugly thing, with its great iron teeth, was not reassuring. But the next moment something uglier, something that filled her with terror and loathing, met her glance; from beneath the very boulder on which she rested, out from among the tall fronds of the hartstongue, glided a spotted snake; and snakes were Hilda's special aversion, her horror of them was excessive, and the sight of the reptile, harmless though it might be, sent cold shudders through her frame, and made her for the moment deadly faint. What if she had trodden upon the reptile, what if it had coiled itself about her ankle, what if she had felt its cold and slimy pressure? "I should have fainted outright, I believe," she answered herself; "oh! this is terrible! I never before was so close to one of those creatures, for I never could stay in the reptile house at the Zoological Gardens long enough to look at them; it was enough to *feel* their hateful presence. Oh, that I had never crossed that bridge!"

And even while Hilda mused and shuddered, her blood ran cold in her veins, for almost from beneath the skirt of her dress there crept out Mrs. Snake, and all the little snakelings of her nursery. She was intruding, evidently, upon a respectable snake household. Once more she went on, looking well to her feet, lest haply she should disturb another snake family, or stumble on another vermin trap. It grew darker, too, for the storm-clouds were getting up, and it must be quite six o'clock. It might have been ten, so long it seemed to Hilda since she left the Hall. She was no coward, but the situation was getting serious; she must have been missed ere this, and what would her hostess think of her when all sat down to dinner, and her chair was vacant? She began now to fear that she had acted rudely in quitting the house without saying a word to any one; but then she had only meant to take an hour's quiet ramble in the home-woods, and be back again long before the dressing-bell. Her self-reproach naturally added another element to her uneasiness, and then—she was so tired. She did not remember

ever having felt so utterly fatigued in all her life; and she shrank now from the boulders and the gnarled roots of trees, as the probable haunt of reptiles. Her knees trembled, her head swam, her heart fluttered, and, though the place was hot and close in the extreme, her hands and feet were cold. She was not nearly so strong as she had been before her illness.

Suddenly she saw through the branches a glimmering of light, and she hoped she had come at last to the end of this interminable forest. She pushed on with fresh spirit, feeling that she could far better combat with her difficulties, if once she could breathe a freer air, and emerge from that weird and terrible lone wood. Only to see her way before her, wherever it might lead, was now her prayer. She did not say with Newman, "I do not ask to see the distant scene;" for the sight of the open country, a glance at the hills, at the far horizon, would have filled her with delight.

Oh, joy! the light grew fuller, the trees were farther apart, and, best of all, there was a broad path, on which she need fear neither traps nor snakes. As she advanced, the walk became wider, the wood receded on both sides, and she could feel the breeze again. Another minute, and she found herself, to her great disappointment, not in the open, but in a large and nearly circular clearing, shut in on every side by a thick wall of woodland.

Yet this was better than the wood itself, for overhead were the leaden clouds. She breathed more freely; and here, too, were signs of human life. Evidently the woodman had been at work, though how long ago she could not guess. The trunks of several trees lay upon the ground, and there was a saw-pit which must have been used quite recently, for chips and sawdust were still lying all around it. Also, at some little distance from the log on which she seated herself, was a rude shed made of rough planks, and thatched with dried ling and heather. As she sat large raindrops began to fall, and thunder muttered in the distance. She determined to try if she could find shelter in the shanty; for rest she *must* have, and the storm, she thought, would be slight, and pass over quickly.

Advancing towards the hut with something like a sense

of relief, she was startled to hear a voice accosting her : "What are you wanting here?" The voice evidently came from the shed, and it was not friendly, nor had it an English accent. Hilda paused, in sudden affright, and glancing into the darkness of the tenement, saw some living object crouched, as it seemed to her, on a heap of dried bracken. Was it a man or a woman? She could not tell, the shadows were so deep. Again the creature spoke: "Come in ; you won't be harmed."

This time a feminine intonation was audible, and somewhat reassured, Hilda entered, and found herself in a mere hut, well littered over with bracken, which was piled up in heaps in one corner, where a woman was composedly sitting, doing nothing, apparently, but keeping watch over a large and very peculiar-looking foreign knapsack. She drew it closer to her, as Hilda crossed the threshold. As she did so, a vivid flash of lightning lit up the place, and for an instant displayed the olive-tinted brows and queer apparel of the speaker. She was a gipsy, of course, but not an ordinary gipsy. Hilda thought she was too old to be kidnapped ; she had no valuables about her, her purse as well as her watch being luckily at home, and the Zingara seemed to be quite alone—though how near the tribe might be she did not like to guess. There were, however, no signs of any encampment.

"Sit down," said the supposed gipsy. She spoke like a person accustomed to command, and there was an unmistakable Tuscan ring in her speech, or it might be Spanish, Hilda was not linguist enough to decide which ; but her English was very good and clear. Miss Capel obeyed, seating herself, nothing loth, on a mound of fern, and waited to be again interrogated.

"What do you here, young mistress?" inquired the swarthy dame.

"I have lost myself in the woods, and I strayed here by chance. I am very tired."

"Where do you come from?"

"From Bradenshope."

"This is Bradenshope! The Bradens are lords of the land hereabouts."

"I meant that I came from the Hall. I am staying there."

"Then you are not a Braden born?"

"No. I am a Capel."

"A Capel! I don't know any Capels; but are you kith or kin of the Bradens?"

"Not in the remotest degree. Miss Braden and I are friends—that is all." Hilda spoke the one word, "friends," with considerable emphasis, for she did not like the woman's tone and manner in speaking of the family. As she grew accustomed to the obscurity of the place, she could see that she was conversing with a middle-aged woman, whose eyes were large, dark, and fierce, and whose complexion was certainly of the Zingara type. Was it Moorish or Neapolitan? Her forehead was low and broad, her features regular, her grizzled hair had doubtless once been raven black, her face must have been beautiful long years ago. She had massive gold ear-rings in her small, brown ears, and she had rings on her slender, dusky fingers, a large brooch—of gold and carbuncles apparently—fastened a richly-dyed scarf about her neck and shoulders. Hilda wondered whether she had the honour of an interview with the gipsy queen. Rallying her courage, she in her turn became interlocutor. "I, also, may ask you why *you* are here?" she said, courteously.

"You may ask, but you will not be answered," was the calm reply, spoken, however, not ungraciously. "Signorina, it would be an evil day for you if I told you my true business here; an evil day for me if I told you an untruth. The stars called me here, and I came; let that suffice. The storm grows heavy, you must stay here awhile. Let me treat you as my guest. Are you hungry?"

"I am dreadfully hungry," said Hilda, quite naturally. "I am faint from want of food."

"Do the lords of Bradenshope, then, starve the guests beneath their roof-tree?"

"Of course not; I had no appetite at my luncheon, and now my dinner and I are I know not how many miles apart!"

"Here is bread—cakes, do you call them?—and here is milk! The bread is wholesome, the milk is fresh—if the thunder has not turned it, that is. The cup is clean; I

rinsed it in the spring an hour ago, and it has not been touched since. Eat and drink without fear, my daughter."

Half wondering at herself, and wholly astonished at this strange encounter, she accepted the proffered hospitality, and ate a roll, and drank a mug of milk. The roll was a common one, such as the baker at Endlestone generally sold—it came, probably, from his shop ; the milk was sweet and fresh as an English cow could yield ; the mug was of the cheapest Stafford ware. Hilda felt revived when she had finished her unexpected repast ; but all the while she was eating and drinking her hostess was closely scanning her countenance. Presently she spoke. " It still rains heavily, but the storm is passing over. Let me tell you your fortune while you stay."

" No, thank you," said Hilda, shortly ; " some of it is told already, the rest I do not want to hear. God is the arbiter of my fortune, and I am content to leave it all with Him."

" You do not believe, then, in the soothsayer's art ? "

" I do not ; but if I did, my answer would be the same."

" I am no impostor—no vulgar cheat. I ask neither for silver nor gold. I read what the stars say ; but not for money ! not for favour ! "

And as she spoke she grasped Hilda's left hand, and closely examined the palm. " The line of life has been crossed, I see. At one point it almost disappears. It is not long since you were near death ! Now it runs smoothly ; but it will be crossed again and again. You will have a happy and prosperous old age."

" Thank you," said Hilda, laughing. " You might have told that safely to any one. Crosses and calms diversify most people's lives. It does not need to study palmistry to discover that. As for my being near death, all the country knows I was half-drowned under the ice about seven months ago."

" I did not know it. Seven months ago I was tending the vines in Corsica. But I can tell you more of the future, if you wish it."

" I thank you, but I do not wish it. As I told you before, my future is in God's hand. There let it remain till, in His good time, it is unrolled before me."

"As you will ; but hear this word of warning ! You are young, you are fair; you have a heart, but its depths have never yet been sounded. Stay not too long at Bradenshope. Wed not the young lord of Bradenshope."

"I have no thought of wedding any one, and Mr. Braden is nothing to me. You ought not to discuss him."

"Great sorrow has visited the House of Braden, and the shadow still hangs over it. There is a mystery which must be solved. The Signor Valtar Braden, he will never succeed the Signor, his father. He will never reign over the goodly lands of Bradenshope."

"Do you mean that he will *die* ?" said Hilda, with a shiver. "Take care what you say ! I am not the simple country-girl you take me for. I have heard that there *are* wicked persons in the world who take measures to ensure the accomplishment of their predictions. Say no more, for if aught happens to Walter Braden, I will denounce you."

"You are a brave damsel. Denounce me, then, when the right time comes. But I tell you, Valtar of Bradenshope will never stand in his father's place. It has been always Lord Paolo—that is, Paul. It will be Paul again —there will be no Lord Valtar."

"Certainly not ! the Bradens belong to the Baronetage, not to the Peerage of England. The present master of Bradenshope is *Sir* Paul, as his father and his grandfather were before him. There would have been another Sir Paul, but he is dead. I dare say you know all this as well as I."

"I dare say I do. I say again, wed not this young man who is living. He will not be *Sare* Valtar. He must make room for *Sare* Paul. *It is his doom.* The stars have said it."

"There is no Paul left to take the title. Walter Braden may some day have a son of his own named Paul—he most likely will ; but the father must come before the child, despite the accident of name."

"Very well ! I know what the stars declare. Only remember my warning ! Let not your fate link itself with that of the Signor Valtar. The rain has ceased. Shall I show you the way home ? "

"I shall thank you to do so," said Hilda, rising, and feeling as if she must have dreamt all that had passed since she left the familiar home-wood to cross the brook. And yet she could not awake! There was the Zingara, tall and stately, standing before her; there were the dripping logs and the drenched branches, and the evening sun was shining.

"Are we far from the Hall?" she asked.

"Tolerably far; but I know a short cut that will take you there in half-an-hour." And, without another word, the woman strode on so swiftly that Hilda could with difficulty keep up with her. They crossed another and less dense part of the wood, then an open pasture-ground where cattle were feeding—one of the cows had, doubtless, supplied that welcome draught of milk—then a sort of wilderness, half shrubbery, half thicket; and then Hilda saw before her the western windows of the Hall glistening through the trees. When she turned to thank her guide she had disappeared, but the way was straight before her.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety."

"But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave."

As we know, Hilda was missed, and that soon after her departure. Christina went to her room to ask her to go with her to the glasshouses and gather fresh flowers for the table; for the Bradenshope head-gardener was generous enough to allow the young ladies of the family to pick and choose, occasionally, for themselves. Miss Braden

found the bird had flown, and then she began to institute inquiries as to her probable whereabouts.

"I am afraid," said gentle Lady Braden, "we have been rather neglectful of our guest to-day. We have made her rather too much one of ourselves. I have not seen her since luncheon."

"I have tidings of Hilda," said Agnes, coming in presently. "Andrew was weeding in the shrubbery, and he saw her cross the park in the direction of the home-wood. Finding us all occupied, she went, I dare say, to take a little ramble on her own account."

"No doubt," said Christina; "but I am afraid she has been left rather too much to her own resources ever since Walter's letter came."

"She was not dressed for walking," added Agnes. "Andrew noticed that she wore only her broad garden-hat; so she is not going far."

"She is taking rather a long stroll for such a dull afternoon, and with such threatening clouds overhead," observed Sir Paul, a full hour afterwards; and some one wondered whether she had carried an umbrella with her. Emily was afraid she had not; they had all got out of the habit of thinking of umbrellas since the dry weather had set in. And then a carriage was discerned quite across the park; no doubt it conveyed Mr. Braden and his friend, for it was coming along the road that led direct from Ellingham, and for the moment Hilda was forgotten. It was not till Christina went into her room, ready dressed herself, with a lovely *Eucharis* for her guest's hair, that her continued absence was actually discovered; and now it was beginning to rain a little, and there was one long, low peal of thunder. Christina grew uneasy, and poor Lady Braden was quite unhappy.

Sir Paul tried to cheer her. "Don't be afraid, mamma, love; the dear girl would not go beyond the park; she would not stray far away from home, I am convinced, and a tempest brooding, too! She cannot come to any harm, though I am afraid she will get a thorough wetting if she is not quickly housed. I am glad Walter and Philip are safe before the storm begins."

"She would hardly walk as far as the paddocks where

the cattle are?" suggested Walter, anxiously. "How came you to let her go moping about by herself? She may as easily lose herself in the park as anywhere else. For my part, I don't half know my way when I wander over to the side next the forest."

Philip Harwood wished the young lady would make her appearance, for he wanted his dinner. The first bell had rung, and there was an appetising savour of ducks and peas, as he took the shortest way to the dining-room down the backstairs. And then the second bell sounded long and loud, but still no Hilda. What was to be done? Lady Braden declared she would not sit down without her; but Sir Paul at length persuaded her. "My dear," said he, "why make yourself ill? Eat your dinner, and be sure Miss Capel is sheltering from the rain in one of the lodges. Bless me! what a flash! I thought we should have it—the fag-end of the storm, at least! Now for the rain! Eat your dinner, mamma; we shall not see our young friend till it is over."

Thus entreated, Lady Braden did eat her dinner, but she could not enjoy it, nor could Christina, and Sir Paul every now and then looked anxiously from the window, ardently wishing that he knew certainly where Hilda had found refuge. It was rather a hurried meal, and no one waited for any dessert. The gentlemen all agreed that it was "getting serious," and that a search must at once be instituted. The rain was abating, the sun was breaking through the clouds, and a beautiful bow was spanning, as it seemed, at least one-half the park.

Walter and Philip were ready to set forth. Sir Paul insisted on exploring the path which led to the home-wood. Agnes and Emily donned their waterproofs, and several of the servants were despatched in different directions.

Agnes and Emily were the finders, or rather the discoverers of the runaway. They met her on the borders of the Pleasaunce, looking wofully tired, and sadly bedraggled with walking through the wet grass and drenched undergrowth of the tangled woods.

"You poor dear!" cried Agnes, running up to her. "What has happened to you? where have you been?"

"I scarcely know where I have been, Aggie. I was foolish enough to lose my way. I shall never do for a bushranger. And oh! I am so tired."

"Have you been walking all this time?"

"Not quite. I took shelter during the rain; but, Agnes, I am afraid I have been behaving rather rudely. I ought not to have set out so independently, all by myself; only, you see, I never dreamed of going farther than the end of yonder wood. I just went out for an hour's stroll."

"I understand. You are not the first person who has been lost in our woods. But come—let us make haste home, that you may get rid of those wet skirts, and have something to eat."

Christina and Lady Braden were on the hall-steps when the girls approached the house, and Hilda was received with every demonstration of delight. Christina hurried her upstairs, and would not allow a word of explanation till all the dabbled garments had been removed and proper refreshment taken. And then Christina said: "If you are quite rested, I think you had better go downstairs with me. They will have brought the coffee in by this time, and we can all hear your adventures."

"Is it worth while going down again to-night?"

"Very much worth while, I should say. Papa is most anxious to listen to your story; and besides, you have not seen Walter and Philip Harwood. They have both been out, looking for you."

Hilda reflected a moment, and decided that she had better yield to Christina's request. At the same time she resolved to be silent, for that night, at least, as regarded the gipsy's strange prediction respecting Mr. Braden. She would think it over presently—"sleep upon it," as wise folks say, and then determine whether or not she was justified in keeping to herself anything that she had heard. In the drawing-room she found all the family assembled, and Mr. Harwood with them. Walter brought her a comfortable low chair, and placed it by his mother. Philip Harwood pushed one of the little tables, with which the room abounded, into her vicinity. Agnes rushed with a cushion, and Emily with a footstool, while Sir Paul himself handed her coffee. The lamps were lighted, but the

curtains were not drawn, and the sky, now almost clear of clouds, showed softly from without, and the wavy outlines of the hills were still visible in the lovely lingering summer twilight.

"And you are sure, my dear, you feel none the worse?" said Lady Braden, presently, when Hilda's cup was emptied.

"Not in the least, dear Lady Braden," she replied. "I am sure it is very good of you not to scold me for all the trouble and anxiety I have caused you. It was no small addition to my trouble when I could not find my way, to think how strange my behaviour must appear to you."

"I think it is we who are chiefly to blame. We were so taken up with the prospect of our boy's return, that we left you to your own devices; and it was the most natural thing that you should take an informal ramble this hot, close afternoon. But do tell us which way you went?"

"I went through the home-wood by the path I knew, till I saw some lovely flowers, and turned aside to gather them; and after a while I came out at the head of a beautiful little glen, traversed by a brook, that I am sure must be a torrent in the winter, and there was the most romantic bridge——"

"And you crossed it?" interrupted Sir Paul. "Didn't I say, mamma, she had gone in that direction? I beg your pardon, my dear; but I felt almost sure you had crossed Ferndell Bridge! And so you got into the forest?"

"I suppose I did. It seemed quite like the 'forest vast and gloomy,' of the song; and when it grew dark before the storm came, it was a veritable Black Forest. And I saw horrible things—snakes and vermin-traps."

"The snakes are harmless, I believe, but they are not pleasant companions. As to the traps, I thought they were gone; they are cruel things to use. A poor animal might be caught, and linger in agony no one knows how long, for it is very seldom that any one goes into the heart of that old forest. My dear, I am most thankful you *did* find your way out of it; you might have had to spend the night there. Only the woodmen really know the place; and perhaps the poachers—but, then, I do not

strictly preserve my game. I cannot believe that God made the wild creatures of the wood for one class only. It must have been a Providence that directed your feet, for clue you could have none."

"I am sure it was Providence! I found a gipsy woman, and she sheltered me during the storm, and then walked with me till I could see the house."

"A gipsy woman!" cried they all.

"I had no notion there were any on or about our lands," said Walter. "I never saw a trace of gipsies."

"Are you sure the woman was not a mere tramp?" asked Sir Paul; "though how a tramp should get into our woods is more than I can tell; we are so far off the main road."

"But you spoke of being sheltered?" observed Lady Braden; "was there, then, a camp?"

"No; nor any sign of one. I came at last into a large clearing, where there was a saw-pit and some felled trees, and there I saw a shed, or hut, and I went into it when the rain began, and found it already occupied by no less a person—I should imagine—than the gipsy queen! Most decidedly she was not a tramp, Sir Paul."

"Was she alone?"

"Entirely so; and she gave me excellent bread and milk, and told me my fortune."

"Of course! And promised you a handsome husband and a rich inheritance! And you were warned against a fair young man, and cautioned not to trust in a dark woman, who wished you ill! I know the rigmarole, Hilda; and what might be her majesty's fee for unrolling the scroll of the future?"

"She made no charge. She said she wanted no one's gold or silver; and when I told her I did not wish to know my fate, she seized my hand, and began to talk about the line of life; and then I was silly enough to let her chatter on."

"Oh, do tell us what she said!" cried both the younger girls.

"Very little! Nothing to any purpose. She said I had had trouble, and should have it again; that my course should sometimes be rough and sometimes smooth. I

fancy I could have predicted so much myself. And she had evidently heard about my accident on the ice, for she informed me that I had not long ago had a narrow escape of my life."

"That shows she belongs to the neighbourhood," remarked Walter, thoughtfully. "I wonder who she is! Chrissie, can't you guess? You know all the queer people."

"What was she like?" asked Miss Braden.

"She was tall, and middle-aged; she must once have been beautiful. Her skin was very dark—Spanish or Italian, I should say; her accent was certainly of Southern Europe, though her English was good. Then she was gorgeously dressed; her scarf was of all manner of colours—the richest dyes, too, and it was of singularly fine texture; it was clasped by a brooch of massive gold, and deep flashing red stones—carbuncles, I thought. She had heavy ear-rings, too, of curious workmanship, and half-a-dozen rings upon her fingers."

"It must have been the queen of the gipses, though how her Bohemian majesty came to visit Bradenshope, and without her retinue, I cannot guess!" exclaimed Walter. "I shall explore the clearing myself to-morrow."

"Pray do not!" was on Hilda's lips; but she checked herself in time. Then, when all conjectures were exhausted, the girls began asking Hilda how she felt when she found herself lost, and alone with the snake-family; and from one thing to another the conversation became general, and Hilda's adventure was for the moment forgotten.

She was so wearied that she fell asleep almost as soon as she laid her head on the pillow, and her slumbers were too profound for dreams till towards morning, and then she dreamt that she was once more in the wood, only it was darker and weirder than ever, and snakes hung from the branches of the trees, and swung themselves from bough to bough, as she had read of them doing in a volume of travels in Venezuela, which she had taken from Sir Paul's library. And among them, surrounded by reptiles, was the supposed gipsy queen, and she clasped in her arms a heavy tome, which she declared to be the

"*Book of Might*," of the wondrous wizard, Michael Scott ; and then, in the Zingara's place, sat her Aunt Dorothy, and she was whisking eggs for a pound-cake, and the snakes began to talk to her, and one of them said, "Read me the riddle of Bradenshōpe—or die ! " And while she struggled to escape from a huge boa-constrictor that threatened to enfold her, she awoke, and found herself, to her infinite satisfaction, safe in bed, and the sun was shining on the hills, and the birds were singing.

It was still quite early ; even the servants were not astir, and Hilda, rather stiff after her yesterday's unwonted exertions, lay still, debating in her own mind the question of disclosing or keeping secret the gipsy's fateful prophecy. "It will only vex them," she thought, as she deliberated ; "it will frighten dear Lady Braden, and it must be all sheer nonsense ! And yet there was something very strange and earnest in the woman's speech ! Did she mean to predict that Walter would die before his father—that a son of his would inherit Bradenshōpe, I wonder ? I wish she had not said it, and to me. She did not seem like an impostor, and yet she must be one. Her fortune-telling, too, was not of the orthodox gipsy kind. It strikes me she was only acting a part when she examined my hand—that she no more believed in her pretended art than I do. She evidently knows all about the Bradens and their misfortunes, and yet she is a foreigner. Perhaps she saw them when they were in Italy, or heard something about them, or, perhaps—Oh, dear ! I wish I could decide which I ought to do—hold my tongue or speak. I can't bear to disturb them all, and it really might be bad for Mr. Braden to receive the impression of his premature decease. I dare say he would only laugh, but such things do make an impression even upon very sensible people. And I remember that some one told me that there was an element of superstition in the Braden character.

"I think I had better be silent—and yet—and yet!—if any evil is threatened ! if there were any menace in the woman's words ! If harm happened to the sole surviving son of this ancient house—if it were proved that there was any plot, then, how I should blame myself for not having spoken. My silence then would seem like treachery.

I should never forgive myself for having concealed that part of yesterday's adventure. Nonsensical as it appears —this prophecy—I do not like the responsibility of keeping it all to myself. Nothing is easier than to *cause* a prediction to be fulfilled. And she said she came from Corsica, and it may be a real case of *la vendetta*! And a word from me might foil any scheme of wicked malice and revenge. Though what such kind-hearted, truly good people as the Bradens can ever have done to excite even a Corsican to the deadly feud, I cannot think, only the *vendetta* is handed down from generation to generation, so no one can be sure when and how the quarrel originated. Ah! I have it. I will tell the story, in confidence, to Christina, and she shall decide as to the right plan to pursue. She will know whether they were idle words or not, and whether anything ought to be said in the family, for Christina is wonderfully wise and prudent. I have noticed they all go to her for counsel, not even excepting Sir Paul."

And then Hilda, feeling no longer perplexed or uneasy, fell asleep again, and was only roused by Agnes coming to the bedside with her breakfast.

"Is it so late?" she exclaimed, springing up, in dismay. "I must have overslept myself! Is everybody down?"

"Everybody but mamma, and we have all finished breakfast. Chrissie came in an hour ago, to see how you were, and found you so sweetly asleep she had not the heart to disturb you."

"And I never heard either prayer-bell or breakfast-bell."

"You did not hear the prayer-bell, which rang while Chrissie was going downstairs, and we did without the breakfast-bell for once. Philip and Emily were in the garden, and Walter called them with his dog-whistle. But are you rested?"

Hilda declared that she never felt better, only her legs were just a little stiff, but a good walk would set them right again.

"On the homoeopathic principle," said Agnes, "'like cures the like!'" And then Hilda took her breakfast,

while Agnes sat by and chatted merrily, and told her that they were going to make a sort of picnic to Arnheim Towers, and that Walter was very much surprised to find that Miss Capel had not been taken there already. "It is, properly speaking, Walter's house, but of course he does not care to set up housekeeping till he gets a wife. And now, Hilda, make haste and dress, for some of us are going to ride, and papa has arranged for mounting you."

"But I have no habit."

"We can find you one, I dare say. You and Chrissie are pretty much alike in figure, and I know she can supply you. Papa says we must take advantage of the fine morning, but we are not to go too far, for the glass is falling steadily, and all the gentlemen say there will be a thorough change; the storm—or storms, rather, for according to the newspapers there have been several—have unsettled the weather. Papa prophesies a very wet evening; so we had better be out of doors while we may."

"Who is going to ride?"

"We three girls and both the boys; also yourself, I hope."

"The *boys* being Mr. Braden and Mr. Harwood?"

"Precisely. One always calls one's brothers and their most intimate friends 'the boys,' till they are married. And I know two maiden ladies who are, oh! ever so old!—fifty, at least!—and their brothers always speak of them as '*the girls!*'"

"Rather antiquated girls! And fifty does seem very old to us, *now!* I should not be surprised, though, if we, when in our turn we come to be fifty, imagine ourselves still—*tolerably young*,—eh, Aggie?"

"Fifty seems to me—well! if not old, very elderly. It cannot be exactly old, because mamma is not much over fifty, and papa, for all his silver beard, is still a year or two less than sixty. And I should not call either papa or mamma *really old*, you know! After all, I should say, age is not to be counted by years."

"How, then, would you count it, Agnes?"

"By the people themselves—by their hearts and feelings. You know Shakespeare says—

"'Crabbed age and youth
Cannot live together.'

That is just where it is : 'crabbiness'—if there be such a noun—must always make people old and disagreeable ; and brightness and real goodness must always keep them young. I have known persons who have lived a goodly number of years in this world retain their youth still ; there was something in them ever fresh and charming—a sort of evergreen-nature that kept its beauty, for all the flight of years. And I have known quite young folks grow old long before their time."

"Sorrow would make people old, Agnes."

"I don't think it. Sorrow makes them experienced and more or less saddens them, but it does not really age the kind of people I mean ; however beaten down by adversity they may be, they have in their inmost souls an inexhaustible spring of joy and hope, an elasticity of mind and thought which never quite deserts them. I fancy the solution of the problem is this—unselfish, generous, sympathetic people keep their youth to any age ; those who are selfish, mean, and unsympathising prey, as it were, on themselves, continually, and know nothing of youth save its inexperience and its folly."

"And narrow-mindedness must have something to do with it, I should think. People who cherish conservatism to their finger-tips, who cannot bear the march of progress, who are vexed and crossed because things *are not as they used to be*, must naturally age long before their proper period."

"Oh, yes ! I know there are such people ; they are always bewailing the golden days of their youth, and bemoaning the world as it stands at present, and sighing like seals, while they declare how far otherwise it was *in their time*! the perpetual wet blankets of poor human nature. Ah ! you should have known our dear grandmother ! She lived to be eighty-five, and she was full of love and sympathy to the last. She kept up her interest in things and people till a sort of drowsiness seemed to steal over her faculties, and so blunt—at times, certainly—her susceptibilities. Yes, she took an interest in us all ; she liked the play of children, she was pleased when we carried to her our girlish difficulties ; she always wanted to hear the news, and was quite a politician. Dear me !

she read the debates as long as she could hold a newspaper in her hands."

"I have heard that there is no surer sign of a strong, beautiful, healthful character than a pure sympathy with the course of events, either domestic or political, as revealed to us by a good, earnest, liberal-toned paper, which gives all sides of a question, and is not afraid to speak what it holds to be the truth."

"But here we are chattering away, like Tennyson's 'Brook,' and you are not dressed. I'll show you grand-mamma's picture when we come back from our ride; she was a downright dear old darling! Some people are older at thirty than she was at eighty, and she took her youth with her to heaven."

Hilda had a very pleasant ride with her friends, and somehow she lost her dread, or shyness rather, of Walter, and enjoyed his society amazingly. Philip was engrossed with Miss Emily—the direction in which those two young people were drifting was scarcely to be mistaken. Agnes was going to "lose her pair," as Christina had lost hers before her.

It was not till they all went to their rooms at night that Hilda found a safe opportunity of speaking fully and privately to Christina. She was more than ever convinced of the unwisdom of keeping to herself what *might* turn out to be of the first importance.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WILD CATTLE.

"I cannot tell how the truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas told to me."

SIR PAUL BRADEN's previsions were realised. It was a thoroughly wet night, and the young people of course congratulated themselves on having accomplished their

ride while the sunshine lasted. Everybody seemed willing to make a virtue of going early to bed, and the clocks had scarcely struck ten when Christina, at her mother's request, rang for chamber candles. Sir Paul declared it was ten degrees colder than before the storm, and Walter, listening to the howling wind and the pelting rain, was afraid the excursion to Arnhem Towers, which had been planned for the morrow, would have to be indefinitely postponed.

"And there is no knowing," responded Philip Harwood, "when we shall have it fine again, now that the weather has broken up."

"And July is often one of the wettest months of the year," said Emily. "If only it had held up one more week!" And after these dismal forebodings, the party separated.

Christina and Hilda went upstairs together, and the latter was deliberating on the expediency of putting off the proposed confidential conversation till next day, when her friend happily settled the matter by saying, "Will you not come into my room and have a chat? Since I began to stir about I have lost all my drowsiness, and just now I am feeling preternaturally wide awake. Come, let us have a regular bedroom confabulation."

"I am very willing," said Hilda. "Indeed, I have been wanting to say something to you all the evening—I may say, all day! We have some grand bedroom parliaments, as we call them, at the Blue House. Sometimes we discuss our business in pairs, sometimes in full conclave. I will just put on my dressing-gown and take down my hair, and be at your service for the next hour, if you care to stay up so long."

In a few minutes the two girls had made themselves very comfortable, as girls well know how to do when they settle themselves for a cosy chat in their own rooms. "It ought to have been winter, and then we should have had our fires to sit over," said Christina, as Hilda appeared, armed with combs and brushes, and attired in a long grey robe. "I am quite chilly to-night—this cambric thing of mine hardly keeps me warm enough; and last week the slightest muslin *peignoir* was too heavy. Ah! here are

two old knitted shawls ; let us put these over our shoulders. I have quite a collection of old soft shawls. Now, then, settle yourself in that delicious chair—it is my very own, for I bought it with my own money to console myself for Mary's departure. Mary and I were room-mates always, as Agnes and Emily are. I have scarcely yet forgiven James Crosbie."

Miss Braden was evidently in very good spirits, and she talked away for several minutes about her eldest sister's marriage, and the loss she herself sustained thereby, before she noticed that her companion was listening with an abstracted air. She suddenly interrupted herself in the middle of a sentence, exclaiming, "What an inhuman creature I am ! You are as tired as you can be ; I ought not to keep you out of bed. Why did you not refuse my thoughtless invitation ?"

"Because I wished to accept it ; and I am not at all tired now—I have quite got over yesterday's long pilgrimage. The ride this morning freshened me up, and, to confess the truth, I had a private little snooze this afternoon, before it was time to dress for dinner. I came up to write to Irene, and went to sleep instead."

"You look so grave, as if something were upon your mind."

"And there is something upon my mind—the something that I have been wishing all day to tell you, only I could not find an opportunity, and could not bring myself to make one."

"There is nothing the matter ?" And Christina's bright face was momentarily shaded.

"Nothing—nothing at all. You will laugh when you hear my confession, or revelation, or whatever it may be called."

"You will take me for a veritable coward ; but, indeed, Hilda, we have suffered so much during the last three or four years, that a very little makes us nervous. I dare say you have heard something of our great trouble."

"Yes," replied Hilda, hesitatingly ; "but my cousins did not say much. Still I am glad that you have made some reference to—to that great sorrow, for what I have to say would scarcely be intelligible without mention of your brother's name."

"Do you mean poor Paul? Oh! Hilda, has anything fresh come up against him? Tell me quickly, please."

"Dear Christina, do not be alarmed. It is a very simple thing, after all, and I dare say a very foolish thing, too. You remember the gipsy—if gipsy she were—that I told you about? Well, she said some things which I did not repeat; which at first I meant never to repeat; but, upon mature reflection, it seemed to me that it would be only wise to tell it all to you, and let you judge for yourself whether it was worth your notice."

"It—what she said, then, refers to our family?"

"It does. But you may depend upon it, it is all sheer nonsense. She began by warning me not to mingle my fate with the Bradens"—she could not bring herself to say that she had been enjoined not to *wed* with the heir of the Bradens—"and then she proceeded to declare that Walter would never inherit Bradenshope; never succeed to the baronetcy. There always had been a Sir Paul—or, as she phrased it, a Lord Paolo—and there always would be. She wound up with, 'He will not be Sare Valtar, he must make room for Sare Paul; the stars have said it.'"

"How very extraordinary! And what could she mean? But gipseyes love dark sayings, and this one evidently knows something about our family. There is, however, no possible Sir Paul after my father for whom Walter could make way."

"Is Paul a family name?"

"In our branch of the family it is. We had a young cousin Paul once—a second cousin—to whom papa was very kind, but he died at Eton from the effects of a fall. I never heard of any other Paul Braden, save my own unfortunate brother."

"Evidently the woman was talking nonsense; she wanted to impress me, I suppose."

"She was not English, you say?"

"No, the first glance told me that. I understood that she was a Corsican. I wonder what she wanted here. She could hardly expect to meet any of the family in the depths of that wild wood. You see it was the merest chance that took me there."

"Or else Providence. It was a very curious encounter,

certainly. I know the clearing. I have roamed so far several times in my life, but never alone. The last time poor Paul and I went together, and we saw snakes, and ferns, and several woodmen at work, but no such creature as a gipsy queen."

"I do not feel at all sure that she really was a gipsy. She talked about the stars, certainly, and looked at my palm; but there was none of the reputed cunning of the race in her countenance, nor was there any cringing in her manner. It seems absurd to say so, but there actually was something regal in her look and bearing. If she had said she was an Egyptian princess, I dare say I should have believed her. But is it not odd that she—gipsy or not—a stranger in these parts, should know the by-ways of the park so well? She guided me as easily as you could have done yourself."

"Far more easily, perhaps; for I am quite sure that I could not, in broad daylight, find my way again to that clearing; and if somehow I managed to reach it, I should be in a grievous plight, if it depended upon myself to retrace my steps, or find my way out of the forest. There is a wide morass in one direction, I know—a great, lonely stretch of quaking peat-land, where the Sweet Gale or candleberry myrtle grows plentifully—and beyond that, the great Bradenshawe Fell rises. It is a weird region, this Bradenshawe of ours, when once you have passed the cultivated circle of the park, especially towards the north and east."

"It is a very beautiful one. I never saw finer scenery."

"Nevertheless, I would advise you not to stray beyond bounds again, unless you are properly attended. That woman could not be here entirely alone. The men of her tribe must have been at no great distance, and it would have been most terrifying to have encountered them in so complete a solitude. Then, there are the pastures in which the wild cattle feed, and we always give them a wide berth, I can tell you. There is a bull there, a famous bull, of great value, but only one man dares to have any dealings with his lordship. He is a most furious animal."

"Why does Sir Paul keep him?"

"Because he, and others of his kind, are a sort of heirloom. Bradenshope has always been famous for this curious wild herd, and a certain number of them are always reared and protected in a remote quarter of the park, far from any public road, and uncrossed by any path, save that which is trodden by the cattle-keeper. Mr. Taurus, I believe, is never at large. He has a walled residence all to himself. The cows go where they like within certain limits, but they are cut off by secure barriers from the park proper on one side, and from the morass on the other."

"They are not the white oxen that are talked about?"

"Oh, no; the white oxen, beautiful, mild-eyed creatures! are pets, and as gentle as that pretty Alderney you are so fond of. I may as well tell you there is a very queer legend about the wild cattle. I do not know the rights of it myself; but centuries ago it was pretended that there was some strange link between the fortunes of our house and those fierce animals. There was a certain Braden of Bradenshope, who had a bad name; not because he addicted himself to that polite species of wholesale robbery which the chieftains of that day so largely patronised, and called '*lifting*', nor because, by reason of his constant raids and maraudings, he was at feud with all his neighbours, but because he was—'over sib wi' t' de'il!' Whenever he got into trouble the devil helped him, and it is to be presumed that he returned the devil's kindness. He would not permit any priest to cross his threshold; nor were any of his servants permitted to engage in any religious exercise. One of them was discovered to have gone to mass, and to have confessed himself and received absolution, and he was instantly driven out by his infuriated master, who, I suppose, did not care to offend *his* master, the Prince of Darkness."

"Was this Braden a Paul?"

"No; he was Sir Hubert; but he was known for several generations chiefly as '*Diabolus Braden*'—very shocking to be descended from such an awful personage, is it not?"

"And are you really descended from him?"

"In a direct line; there is no doubt about it. He had a

son very unlike himself, for he still has the reputation of being a saint. He wished to become a priest—or, at least, a monk. His mother did escape and retire to a convent. The story of Sintram's Verena always reminds me of the record of Hugh Braden, and his gentle mother, Dame Petronelle. But Hubert, *alias Diabolus*, would by no means permit his son to follow his inclinations. He treated him with infinite cruelty, and finally forced him into a marriage he detested."

"But the wild cattle—were they his?"

"I am coming to that. It happened once that Sir Hubert was besieged in his stronghold of Arnheim Tower; it was then only a common Border-tower or keep—a regular *Peel*, such as there is still, though in ruins, near Ellingham, and also at Temple-Towerby. I think he was going to be hung, if he could be taken, for the King of Scotland, to whom he owed fealty, had vowed to do justice on him. My memory is at fault as to which of the Jameses it was, but James IV., I should imagine. Anyhow, Sir Hubert was in deadly peril. He and his men were almost starved, and the enemy pressed hard upon them. It came to the point at which there remained only a choice between death and surrender, and for the Knight of Arnheim surrender meant instant and ignominious execution. Now comes the extraordinary part of the story. One of the Scotch king's soldiers taunted Sir Diabolus, and asked him why he didn't send for his master to help him; and he, in the fury of despair, swore an awful oath that he would summon him that very night, and that before cock-crow he would be there, and with him the *forces of hell!*"

"How horrible! And what followed?"

"Like you, the soldier thought it extremely horrible, and he did not relish the idea of being confronted with such foes; but he scarcely believed they would be forthcoming; and laughing to scorn the Knight in his tower, he shouted that he would meet the devil and fight him too, though he were attended by all the powers of darkness. The sun was setting when this took place, and Sir Hubert cried out to his defiant enemy, 'See you yonder sun, sinking behind the western hills? Look well at it,

for you shall not see it rise !' The soldier walked away, making the sign of the cross as he went. He pretended still to laugh and jeer, but he felt strangely uneasy. His companions, however, twitted him with cowardice, and in a drunken revel, which ensued, he forgot his apprehensions. Towards midnight there arose a horrible tempest, such as had never been, says the chronicle, within the memory of the oldest living man. A thick darkness, a very blackness, came down upon the camp and encompassed all the country roundabouts. The earth shook, even the rocks trembled, and lightning blazed from pole to pole. It was a very peculiar lightning, it is said—blue and sulphurous, and it flashed right and left, burning to ashes whatever it struck. The thunder was awful, and mingled with the great, crashing, rolling peals, were strange, unearthly noises, as if hell had indeed broken loose !"

"A regular Walpurgis night!"

"Yes, indeed ; and no doubt the besiegers were terribly frightened, while Sir Hubert, in his tower, enjoyed the horrible confusion. Suddenly, the very ground seemed to be on fire. Earth and sky were mingled in one vast sheet of hot electric flame, and the unearthly noises sounded louder and nearer. There was a tremendous trampling close at hand, as of innumerable cattle making what we should now call a regular *stampede*!—a rushing and tearing and loud trampling of heavy hoofs, and terrible roarings, that could be heard even amidst the thunder ; and the next moment a vast herd of enormous animals—led on, as it seemed, by a bull of preternatural bulk and height, with eyes that glowed like red-hot coals, and snorting fire as he charged the foe—rushed over the camp, trampling and goring all they found. Scarcely a man escaped to tell the tale. When the morning broke, the field was covered with the mangled dead and dying—a ghastly sight—the tents were burned, wherever the hoofs of the infernal beasts had sunk into the ground the soil had turned to charcoal, while all the turf over which the herd had stamped was scorched, as if a fire had passed over it."

"I dare say it had. The lightning would account for that. But what became of the infernal quadrupeds ?"

"When the sun rose they had disappeared. But a few days afterwards, a ferocious-looking bull, of a queer smoke-colour, and nine cows to match, were observed feeding in the Arnheim pastures. No one but Sir Hubert himself dared approach them, especially the bull, who was the terror of all the country round. Sir Hubert and he were seen together continually, and always on the best of terms. Ever since then there has been a herd of curious wild cattle at Bradenshöpe, and when the race becomes extinct, the Bradens, as a family, will be extinct also."

"What an extraordinary story! And are the animals now in the park descended from the original herd?"

"As certainly as we are descended from Sir Hubert. Now and then the herd has dwindled down to a single pair; once there was only one cow and a bull-calf, and then, it is said, the fortunes of the Bradens were at the lowest ebb."

"Are any of them ever killed?"

"Oh, yes! or we should be overrun with them. We have now three cows, and a heifer, I believe, besides the bull; and I rather think there is a calf. Papa will never allow more than four or five of them."

"I wonder he keeps them at all! He cannot believe that they have any influence on his fortunes! Still, I should like to see them. Are they smoke-coloured?"

"Yes, all of them. They have never varied, except in shade, some being of a bluish black, and others a sort of dirty dun grey or lavender. They are considered great curiosities, for there are no others in the country—none, that is, exactly like them; but an American gentleman told papa that he had seen hundreds of the same breed in his own prairies."

"And what became of Sir Hubert?"

"His fate belongs to the legend. He died exactly seven years after the arrival of the strange herd. It was seven years to the day—or rather to the night—and to the hour. There was another awful thunderstorm, and Sir Hubert, who was fond of wandering about after dark, was found in the morning stark dead among the cattle, his corpse so blackened and disfigured as to be scarcely recognisable. But for his wife, Dame Petronelle, he would

have been buried like a dog. At her earnest entreaties he was laid in consecrated ground, though without bell, book, or candle, and at dead of night. I believe, however, masses were said for his soul, and the Lady Petronelle took the veil in a convent of the Ursuline Order, which then existed in the neighbourhood."

"And his son?"

"Was as gentle and meek and pious as his father had been cruel, proud, and heathenish. He was called Sir Damian, and for a century after his death he was remembered as the Good Knight of Arnheim."

"I wonder he kept the cattle."

"I believe his father had exacted an oath from him that the breed should be preserved, and his wife, the haughty Lady Amabel, of Ellingham—Sir Hubert's choice rather than Sir Damian's—was clearly the ruling power at Arnheim. I am afraid our pious ancestor was not at all strong-minded, and allowed himself to be under petticoat government far more than was consistent with the dignity of the head of the house of Braden."

"The Bradens seem to have lived at Arnheim in those days."

"Yes, for this house, except a very small portion of it, did not exist. There were some farm-buildings, and a curious sort of tenement, half fortress and half dwelling, where the steward or bailiff resided. If the wild cattle brought with them deliverance from immediate peril, they seem also to have imported all kinds of misfortunes, for when Sir Damian—who, after all, if the stories about him were correct, had better have been a monk—when he died, a regular tide of trouble and reverse seemed to set in—a tide that for more than a century never turned, though many times the luckless Bradens of that period thought and hoped it must have reached the flood. Domestic sorrows and public disaster alike befell them, death overtook them at home and on the battle-field; they were unhappy in their marriages, their children were snatched away in early life, or lived but to be the curse and shame of their parents. Whatever cause they espoused became the losing one. They fell into disgrace at Court, and one of them, unjustly charged with treason, pined for years a

prisoner in the Tower, and was liberated only to perish miserably in banishment."

"Why did they not try killing the uncanny beasts?"

"Perhaps they never thought of it. At last there was born to the house of Braden a boy, who proved to be the restorer of his family's fortunes. He was pious, but not priest-ridden like Sir Damian; he was religious and brave and high-spirited, and he married a gentle-lady—Mistress Hope Eden, of High Endlestone—a fair maiden, of good descent, and a great heiress to boot. By the way, Hilda, she came from your Aunt Dorothy's Grey House, then the manor-house of what is still called in the county records, 'High Endlestone.' And she seemed to bring with her renewed prosperity and peace. Her husband loved and honoured her, and her children grew up around her and called her blessed. Sir Paul—the first of that name, as far as I know—conceived the idea of building a new and more commodious mansion further to the south, and in a more sheltered aspect, and above all a residence that should be free from the evil memories of the Tower of Arnheim, which had been the scene of many a wicked and bloody action. So he chose the site of the farm-buildings, and raised a goodly tenement, much of which still survives in the north wing; and partly to honour his wife, with whose money chiefly the plan was carried out, and partly because he trusted that in the new home a new and happier life would be commenced, he called the mansion Braden's *Hope!* And so the whole estate came, in course of time, to be known as *Bradenshope*. And that, Hilda, is the history and legend of our house."

"Is that all? I want to hear more."

"You shall hear more another day. Do you know what time it is?"

"Quite twelve o'clock, I am afraid."

"Later than that. Don't look, but go to bed, or I shall have the credit of your heavy eyes and pale cheeks tomorrow."

"Just one word! Shall you speak of what I told you?"

"I must reflect; but at present my idea is to tell papa, and no one else. I think he ought to know."

"And Walter—Mr. Braden, I mean?"

"Papa will be the best judge. He can tell him if he chooses, but most assuredly I shall not breathe a word of the gipsy's prophecy to Walter."

CHAPTER XXX.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP.

"Mother! on earth it must still be so;
Thou rearest the lovely to see them go."

SIR PAUL was not at all inclined to think lightly of his daughter's communication. "I don't like it," he said, briefly; "there is something in it I cannot fathom, and I shall have the woman looked after. Say nothing to Walter. He spoke of going to the forest himself, but the change in the weather will most effectually put a stop to his explorings."

"You do not attach any importance to the prediction, papa, surely?"

"By no means, if I regard it as a prediction; but the gipsy's words seem to me more of an assertion—a positive assertion—than anything of a prophecy."

"But, dear papa, an assertion implies a fact; and the gipsy spoke as if there were some other heir who was to supersede Walter, and that we know is not the case."

"There may be false assertions, my dear, as well as true ones, and people may receive erroneous impressions, which they may circulate in all good faith. I think I shall ask Hilda to repeat to me exactly what the woman said."

"Do, papa; such a story should always be listened to at first hand, if possible. She might add some trifle which I have forgotten, or communicate some idea of her own. Is she not a dear girl, papa?"

"A very dear, good girl, and, I think, a clever one—a gentlewoman, every inch of her. I have never been so

taken with a girl before ; I could treat her like a daughter. Poor child ! she does not know what a father's care and love are like. How long is she staying with us, Chrissie ? "

" The limits of her visit were not exactly defined. She was asked to 'spend a few days at Bradenshope,' which may mean half a week, or a whole fortnight. Longer, I am afraid, we cannot keep her, for she was saying only this morning that after Sunday she must think of returning home, as she could not in all conscience leave Mrs. Dorothy alone any longer."

" Mrs. Dorothy has been alone, as she is at this moment, for the last thirty years. She has her cows, and her pigs, and her poultry, to say nothing of her ferns, and her kitchen-garden, and her maid Barker, who, I must say, sets my teeth on edge every time I meet her. No ! we cannot part with Hilda Capel yet. More and more she reminds me of your dear Aunt Cecily—my favourite and never-forgotten sister."

" That there is a wonderful likeness I can see from the portrait. Papa, I wonder you never called any of us Cecily ! "

" It was simply because I could not bear the idea of another Cecily than the one who had been my second self in childhood. Few sisters and brothers love as we did. My old eyes moisten now when I think of her—so fair, so bright, so early called away. Only a few hours' illness and she was gone, just like a half-blown rose cut down in June. I tell you what we will do, Chrissie ; we will give a very quiet dinner-party—just Mr. and Mrs. Arnison, old Mr. Carew, and Mrs. Dorothy, and then we will coax the latter to extend her niece's furlough. Leave the lady of the Grey House to me. I know how to manage her ! I'll *thee* and *thou* her to her heart's content."

" I'll tell you what it is, papa. You flirt shamefully with Mrs. Dorothy ! Mamma says you do."

" Ah, well ! so long as mamma is not troubled I shall go on flirting. It amuses me to bandy compliments with the fine old lady—I am sure she likes it. Even at seventy, you see, Christina, your sex can appreciate a little delicate flattery."

"Papa, I am ashamed of you! I thought you were above throwing stones at us poor, maligned, much-be-slandered women. If we go in for the higher education, we are at once identified with the shrieking sisterhood; if we are much in society, we are soulless dolls and mere women of the period; if we don't go out at all, we are mopes, only fit to nurse babies, and make porridge; if we go to church on week-days, we are Ritualists; and if——"

"For mercy's sake, stop, my dear Christina. I would have refrained my lips had I known what eloquence of rejoinder awaited me. I beg to say I am a gentleman of the old school, and sincerely appreciate and esteem the sex—*le beau sexe*, my dear, for which you so heartily take up the cudgels! But our dinner-party, that will do, will it not?"

"It will, if mamma approves."

"Of course we will not call it a dinner-party, nor will it, in fact, be one—just ourselves, our staying visitors, Hilda and Philip, and four old friends. My dear, we shall go mourning all our days—especially your mother and I; but it is worse than useless to shut ourselves up from the world, and brood ceaselessly over the grief that, in spite of every change, clings to us always. If it were only mamma and myself, I dare say we should seldom go out, or entertain any one; but you girls and Walter must live your lives, in spite of all that has happened. And then there are duties we owe to the county. We are Bradens of Bradenshope, and as such we must hold our place."

"Yes, I know; but this quiet life—far away from 'the madding crowd'—I like it best. Were it not for the bitter memories—for the sad cause of our seclusion—I should say that I never was happier in my life. For myself, I do not care if I never have another London season; but Agnes and Emily ought to have their rightful advantages, no doubt."

"I fancy little Emmie will be in a position to go out as much as she likes next season. It seems to me that Philip Harwood is come a-wooing of my youngest daughter! What say you, Miss Chrissie?"

"I think you are right, and I am glad. I always

thought Emmie liked Philip ; and Walter vows he has been in love with her ever since she was a little girl with a doll and a skipping-rope. And you will consent, papa?"

"Decidedly. I am only waiting to be asked in order to reply, in true stage fashion, 'Take her, my boy, and be happy !' We know all about Philip and his people. He is, I am sure, a young man to be trusted with a girl's happiness, and he is so well off that he may marry Emily as soon as she is willing. And then, Chrissie, he knows about poor Paul—all about him. It would not be our painful duty to make certain disclosures before we allowed him to become one of the family."

"That is an immense consideration ! It is so horrible to have to open the door of our 'blue closet' to outsiders, however kind and true. And Philip is one of us. Poor Agnes ! she will miss her sister Emily, as I missed Mary."

"It does seem rather out of the fitness of things that the youngest should go next to the eldest. It ought to be your turn first, my dear, and then Aggie's."

"I am quite content to stay at home, papa, to be your home-daughter when all the rest are gone. I don't say but what, if *the prince* came, I might be tempted ; you might have to say of me—

"And o'er the hills and far away,
Beyond their utmost purple rim,
Beyond the night, across the day,
Through all the world she followed him."

"And if it were *the prince*, verily, my Christina, I should rejoice to say it ! It is only a refined form of selfishness that would make moan over a daughter's true happiness ; only a basely selfish parent could wish to keep the children ever under the paternal roof for his or her own pleasure and convenience. Your mother and I have lived our lives ; we have had our golden days of courtship, our wedded happiness—which, thank God ! is still our own, in all its fulness, notwithstanding the clouds that of later years have overshadowed our destinies. Yes ! we have had our day, and I wish my dear children to have theirs ; to live their own lives in their own homes, to enter other realms of love,

"There to rear, to teach,
Becoming, as is meet and fit,
A link among the days to knit
The generations each with each."

There, Puss, you see I can quote Tennyson as well as my bookish daughter!"

"Of course you can, papa; I sometimes think you must have learned '*In Memoriam*' by heart. Now, you had better consult mamma about the party at once, for it must be next week, if we are to beg Hilda of Mrs. Dorothy for a little longer, and some notice is required, even for the most informal gathering."

"I'll go and talk to mamma, as soon as I have seen Coley about those cottages that are to be built at Ten Acres End. Of course mamma is to know nothing more of Hilda's story than what she heard the other night."

"Of course not. She has been more like herself since we returned to Bradenshope; she has steadily improved ever since we settled down here, and Alice Arnison's wedding seemed quite to cheer her up. I would not for anything that her present serenity should be disturbed!"

The young people who had bewailed the change of the weather were not far wrong in their melancholy previsions. Having once commenced to rain, it seemed unable to leave off again, and though there were various bright intervals, and several fair, auspicious mornings, that seemed to betoken returning sunshine and clear skies, there was not, for upwards of a week, one fine day in which it was possible for the ladies to go to any distance.

But the family assembled at Bradenshope were full of pleasant and rational resources, and the house was so large that no one could possibly feel cramped for want of necessary exercise. Many a constitutional was taken in the long galleries and corridors of the great rambling mansion, all the queer nooks and corners were duly explored on Hilda's account, and even the wicked-looking ebony cabinet itself was ransacked for her by Walter Braden, and its treasures unreservedly displayed. She began at last to think it would be a pity to burn Catherine de Medicis' present to the infamous Diana Braden, whose catalogue of crimes was so extensive! And she was not

even sure that the ivy should be cut away, nor that the tapestry, which came from Arnheim, should be removed to the South Kensington Museum.

"It might be lent," she mused aloud, "but the chances are it would drop to pieces before it was well taken from the walls."

"That I am sure it would," replied Walter. "I am not quite certain how old it is, but one of the oldest county chronicles speaks of the Arnheim tapestry as extremely ancient; only we do not know whether it is this identical tapestry that is referred to. There was a fire at Arnheim early in the seventeenth century, and the Tower, or *Peel*, in which my ancestor, Sir Hubert, was besieged, was burnt from the vaults to the battlements; even the massive roof fell in, so that only the mere shell remained. Some of the most valuable effects were saved, but by far the greater part were consumed in the flames. The Tower was never rebuilt; it still stands, a picturesque grey ruin, about a furlong from the present mansion. And whether this tapestry was a portion of the old Tower salvage, or whether it was brought from the more modern building, when the first Sir Paul and his wife established themselves at Bradenshawe, is more than anybody can decide."

"I shall like to see the old Tower, though only the outer walls remain; and the *Heath* on which that Satanic herd were supposed to do their deadly work."

"As soon as ever the weather clears, we will go. I want to see the place again myself. You know, if I marry, I shall have to go and live there, unless I can find a wife who won't mind playing second fiddle to the best mother that ever lived, and to the most gracious lady in the county! The girls will all drift off, of course. Mary is gone; it's very easy to see that Emily is going; and I do know a fellow who thinks Agnes a very queen of loveliness and amiability, only he is so shy, and Agnes has a proud little way with her, though she is so modest and gentle. Chrissie is far too good to be left an unappropriated blessing; she might have married in her first season—I need not tell you that!—but my Lady Christina is difficult, and is waiting, I suppose, for the Bayard of the nineteenth century. Now, when all the girls are gone,

my wife and I might live partly, if not entirely, with the old folks, I should think."

"I should think so."

"We could call 'The Towers' ours, you know, and be there whenever we liked, and yet make Bradenshope our home."

"Of course you could, if Mrs. Braden did not object."

"Mrs. Braden! How prettily it sounds! I wonder how soon she will exist! Do you think she would be likely to object?"

"How can I possibly tell? I could not answer for a person whom I have never, to my knowledge, seen. Some women would excessively dislike not being at the head of an establishment of their own."

"I suppose so," said Walter, rather dejectedly. "But, Miss Capel——"

His sentence remained unfinished, for just then Christina was heard calling from the corridor without, "Hilda! Hilda! we are going to practise our new *glees*, and we must have you. And have you any notion where Walter is?"

"Mr. Braden is here," said Hilda, as, with burning cheeks, she came forth and met her friend. "He has been showing me the secrets of the De Medicis' cabinet, and telling me about the tapestry."

And she could have beaten herself for the silly blushes and conscious tone, which she was sure Christina could not fail to notice.

That evening Sir Paul announced publicly the engagement of his youngest daughter, Emily, with Philip Harwood, Esq., of Harwood Grange, Pineshire; and the young couple were congratulated till they fled the drawing-room, to shut themselves up in the library, where, doubtless, they did not find themselves dull for want of other society than their own.

Later on, while the others were occupied, Sir Paul drew Christina aside into the conservatory, which opened from one end of the large drawing-room, and said, "We can find no traces of the woman; but we have heard of gipsies in the neighbourhood, and we think they must have pitched their camps in Gibbs' Hollow, as there are

signs there of recent fires, and the grass is trampled down. So, I suppose, after all, Hilda's Princess of Bohemia was a veritable gipsy ; and I really think we need not concern ourselves about the sayings of such a person, even though she were the acknowledged queen of all the Zingaras."

"I do not see what we could do, even though we concerned ourselves to the utmost. Do you, then, imagine the tribe has left the neighbourhood ? "

"This immediate neighbourhood, perhaps. But Coley says there are gipsies now in the vicinity of Ash Farm, and the farmer complains that his poultry are nightly paying toll, and his son Ned declares that he hears guns popping in the woods at night."

"I dare say ! Gipsies can generally do a little poaching on their own account."

"I had rather they helped themselves to my game than to Farmer Dawson's fat hens and stubble-geese. However, the farmer must deal with them, if he chooses. I, for my part, shall not trouble myself about them, unless they are brought before me in the justice-room."

"But what could induce the woman to chatter folly about Walter and his heirship ? "

"Don't you see ? These Zingaras are remarkably quick-witted. In all probability she knew perfectly that Hilda was staying with us *en famille*, and she immediately rushed to the conclusion that she and the heir of the house were lovers—perhaps betrothed."

"And if they were, what would it be to a roving gipsy queen ? "

"Only so much that it would present an opportunity for uttering mysterious and significant warnings, and, doubtless, she hoped to elicit something from Hilda which would add to her store of information. An accurate knowledge of family matters is the stock-in-trade of the cunning fortune-tellers, and they manage to make a little truth go a very long way. There, my dear, we will say no more about it; it is scarcely worth our while."

"Papa, I was thinking——"

"Well, my dear, is that an unusual event ? I suppose you were thinking of *something*. Pray what might it be ? "

"I was thinking—don't laugh at me, and don't scold me—suppose Walter and Hilda were to think of each other?"

"Suppose they were? What then, Puss?"

"Would you not be disappointed?"

"No! agreeably surprised. I should be most happy to receive Hilda Capel as my daughter. Where should I find a sweeter, fairer, purer-minded girl? Where would Walter find a better wife than she will be when a good man is lucky enough to win her?"

"You would not mind her unhappy father's infamous repute?"

"I would not; I ought not. If there were any sign of a taint in the blood—if there were the smallest indication of inherited vices, or even foibles, I would never have proposed having Hilda Capel *here*, as my daughters' friend and intimate—to say nothing of my son, from whom I should most jealously keep any fair woman whom I suspected, ever so slightly, of want of moral principle, of a low standard of mind and duty; and remember, Christina, we have our own spectres! There are many who would object to wed the brother of our poor, misguided Paul; who, if they knew *all*, would deem the name of Braden wretchedly dishonoured—as it is—as it is, *Christina!*"

"And for the last century and a-half it has been one of the proudest, one of the most unstained, names in all our Borderland. There has been no unworthy Braden since the days of the wicked 'Black Rupert,' as he was called, and he was a younger son."

"Let us be thankful for a hundred and fifty years of unblemished family repute. It really does seem as if, in some strange way, after some occult law of nature, our poor boy had inherited the weaknesses and sins of some of his ancestors. Ah! we cannot do evil to ourselves alone—the sins of the fathers are indeed visited upon the children. Thank God, there is forgiveness with Him, and we have only to seek help and strength, and they are ours. And, Chrissie! if Walter were not a Christian young man—if he, too, were weak and self-indulgent, and lacking steadfastness of aim and purity of life, I would

not expose a girl like Hilda to the possibility of being addressed by him. No ancient pedigree, no noble blood, no princely fortune can atone for want of virtue, want of honour, want of manly faith. But, Chrissie, what made you utter that weighty '*suppose*'? In matters of this sort, women's eyes are wonderfully keen, I know. Have you any grounds for such a supposition?"

"Not the least, as far as Hilda is concerned. But I do think Walter likes her *very much*; and he was struck with her from the very first. There is nothing between them now, that is positive."

"So far so well! I like people to *walk* into love; '*falling in love*' sometimes includes a good deal of sorrow and disappointment. My dear, let things absolutely alone; you and I will neither make nor mar in this matter. *If* he choose Hilda, and if she accept him, I shall be more than satisfied. Walter is twenty-five, and there ought to be a mistress at Arneim Towers. To quote Tennyson again, like Farmer Allan,

"I would wish to see
My grandchild on my knees before I die."

But, unlike that choleric gentleman, I would not, for all my estate is worth, say, 'Therefore, look to *Hilda*!' for of all follies—I was going to say of all *vices*—matchmaking is the most mischievous and the most unsatisfactory. So let us think no more about it; or, if we must think, let us keep unbroken silence."

"You may be sure I shall be silent, lest I should do harm inadvertently. I think if Hilda once regarded Walter in the light of a possible suitor, she would fly from Bradenshope, and not return again. And there is no one whom I should so much love to have for a sister. I do not think I should have said a word, papa, only before Hilda came mamma was just a little *afraid* on Walter's account."

"Yes, I know! Mamma and I had it all out at the time. Mamma had a prejudice, certainly; but she did not know Hilda then as she does now. I am pretty sure, Chrissie, there would be no opposition there, so you need not distress yourself, should there be signs of another pair of lovers in the house, by reflecting on your share in

the catastrophe, through bringing Hilda here to be your guest."

"Papa, I believe she *ought* to be one of ourselves ! She just suits us all ; I have never had such a companion since I lost dear Mary ; and I am not sure that Mary and I were so completely *en rapport*—on some points, that is—as Hilda Capel and myself are now."

CHAPTER XXXI.

WESTWARD HO !

" When we two parted,
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted,
To sever for years."

"Over the sea, over the sea.
There is my old friend waiting for me."

MRS. DOROTHY accepted Lady Braden's invitation. She appeared punctually to the moment in the old-fashioned hooded phaeton, drawn by Jupiter and Juno, in their best harness, and driven by the respectable Jacob, in his Sunday clothes.

There was evidently something on the old lady's mind ; though displaying all her customary punctilious politeness, she listened with a pre-occupied air to the conversation, even when it was addressed especially to herself. She looked anxious and careworn ; she started when spoken to, and was altogether unlike her ordinary self. Hilda began to fear she had displeased her by not returning home at the week's end ; Christina and her sisters were afraid that she was come to take her niece away. Certainly, appearances augured ill for the success of their scheme, which was to keep Hilda for at least a fortnight

longer. Mrs. Dorothy looked as little like a person to be propitiated as could be well imagined. To the Arnisons she said not much—indeed, she was singularly taciturn to all, and, generally speaking, she had a good deal to say for herself upon such occasions ; she was one who, in a quiet and rather stately fashion, was wont to take her full part in all discussions, and to discharge what she believed to be her social duties towards her host and hostess, and her fellow-guests.

The Bradens were a little surprised, but of course they were far too well-bred to manifest the feeling, in ever so slight a degree ; while the Arnisons, who had noticed their kinswoman's unusual preoccupation and strange reserve on the preceding Sunday, when she had driven home immediately after the morning service, though pressed to remain to luncheon, were more puzzled than before. Something was evidently troubling Mrs. Dorothy, and Mr. and Mrs. Arnison could only wonder that she had chosen to leave the seclusion of the Grey House. Mr. Arnison, who took her in to dinner, endeavoured in vain to converse with her ; he tried the weather, the crops, the farm, the Wesleyan tea-meeting, the small gossip of the town, the last criticism on a noted book,—everything that he could think of, as likely or unlikely to interest his silent neighbour ; and he was just beginning on a letter which had been received that morning from Alice, settling the day of her home-coming, when Mrs. Dorothy interrupted him. “Nephew Ralph, I have always considered thee a tolerably sensible man,—I might say, for a *man*, extremely sensible!—and here thou hast been for the last half-hour dinnin words into my ears, and worrying me with questions I did not care to answer, when all the time thou must have perceived that I was thinking of something else, and wanting to be undisturbed. Thou hast been as great a nuisance to me as ever Polonius was to Hamlet.”

“Indeed, aunt, I am sorry ; but you must allow me to remark that people do not generally dine out in order to indulge in meditation.”

“I know that. I had a reason for coming here, or I should have kept my grumpiness to myself and to my maids at home. Be quiet, I entreat thee—that is, don’t

talk to me ! chatter away nineteen to the dozen, as thou likest it, but leave me alone. Thou shalt know presently what it is that so engrosses me."

Thus rebuffed, Mr. Arnison turned to his left-hand neighbour. Mrs. Dorothy continued her dinner, seemingly unconscious of what she ate or drank, even to taking a certain Hungarian wine which she, not long before, had stigmatised as a mixture of Harrogate-water, rhubarb, and bad Hollands ! Mr. Arnison began to be absorbed himself, in reflecting on his aunt's inexplicable behaviour, and in wondering what could have happened to her so to ruffle the even tenor of her way. He even began to be apprehensive, for Mrs. Dorothy was by no means the woman to suffer herself to be disquieted by trifles. He really was not sorry when Lady Braden gave the usual signal.

It was almost an hour afterwards when he entered the drawing-room with his host ; the young people were all on the lawn busy with the croquet-balls, and Mr. Carew, in spite of his sixty years, had been persuaded to take a mallet. There remained only Lady Braden, Mrs. Arnison, and Mrs. Dorothy, the latter, as usual, busy with her interminable knitting, which appeared to be in a frightful state of confusion, any number of stitches having been dropped and taken up somehow, only to be dropped again.

"It's of no use !" exclaimed Mrs. Dorothy, at last, letting a whole pin-full of stitches go, and, at the same time, rubbing her nose energetically. " You must all think I am demented, and perhaps I am ! Well ! I am greatly exercised in my mind, and so I thought I would come and ask counsel of friends in whose wisdom I have full confidence ; but I had better have stayed at home."

" If we can advise you—assist you, in any way, my dear lady," began Sir Paul.

" Thank you ! thank you. But Ralph Arnison or Louis Michaud will assist me if I need assistance, which I don't imagine I shall ; I have been a lone, lorn woman—an unprotected female all my life, and I can fend for myself as well as ever. As to advice, well ! it sounds horribly ungrateful, but I am afraid it would be of no use ; and it's not my way to go asking counsel when in my heart I

know that I have already come to a decision. The truth is, I have made up my mind since coming here."

"And is it too much to inquire what you have decided, to what you have made up your mind?" inquired the baronet.

"Of course you may! I should not have introduced the subject if I had not meant to speak quite openly. I am going to America."

Had she said she was going to the moon she could not much more have astonished her auditors. For nearly half a minute a dead silence reigned; it was broken by Mr. Arnison.

"Aunt Dorothy, you are not wont to utter idle words; but still, I cannot help saying—*do you mean it?*"

"Certainly I mean it. I am not a child to play at crossing the Atlantic, nor am I a diplomatist *pretending* to do something in order to mask my actual designs! I repeat it, I am going to America; I shall take my passage before the week is out."

"You are not going to *emigrate*?"

"Emigrate! Do you think I have such a bee in my bonnet as that comes to? If you do, take me to the County Lunatic Asylum without loss of time. No! I am going—*on business*."

"Would it be impertinent to ask on what business?" said Mr. Arnison.

"I am going to look for a friend, whom I thought was dead these thirty years, whom now I discover to be living."

"To 'look for' a friend?" remonstrated Sir Paul. "My dear Mrs. Dorothy, do you know where your friend is? America is such a wide field; it is half the world. You may search for years and never find him or her!"

"My friend is a man," returned Mrs. Dorothy, shortly, "so you may say '*him*.' And I shall find him, or his grave, before I come back again."

Sir Paul and Lady Braden could not help wondering whether their esteemed guest was not in very truth losing her sober senses. Of all persons in the county likely to go off to America in search of a man, long since reported to be deceased, Mrs. Dorothy might be named as the very last.

"You are quite sure that your friend is living still, that there is no mistake?"

"I am as sure of it as I can be of anything."

"Does he expect you?"

"How should he expect me, when I don't know to five hundred miles where he is? No, but he needs me sorely."

"But you have some clue, surely?" asked Sir Paul.
"Excuse me, but I do not think it right that you should set off rashly on such a journey, and——"

"And 'at my age'! you would say. I must confess that the expedition looks very much like a wild-goose chase. However, I have a clue, and if it fail me, why, then I must seek till I find another. As to my age, I am well and strong, and possess quite as much energy and perseverance as I did five-and-twenty years ago. Besides, I shall take it quietly. I shall cross from Liverpool in one of the best steamers, and take a first-class passage. And I shall not be alone, for Barker insists on accompanying me."

"And when you find yourself in New York, what will you do then?" asked Mrs. Arnison, anxiously. Her aunt was certainly in good health, and "a wonderful woman for her age," as people say; but then, there was the fact of her age, and she certainly was not nearly as vigorous as she had been a few years back. Mrs. Dorothy had not been farther from home than York for as long a time as Mrs. Arnison could recollect, and now, having accomplished her three-score years and ten, she was about to visit that other and far more juvenile York across the seas! It was only the other day she had excused herself from some of the wedding festivities, on the score of not being as young as once she was.

"Do!" she replied, sharply, "what should I do, but rest for a day or two and see the city—perhaps I shall call on the Rev. Ward Beecher. Then—go on again; if I have not the full address, I know I must go past Lake Superior, which, according to modern explorers, is not a lake at all, but a vast inland sea. I am not sure, but I think I shall have to go to a place called Saskatchewan."

"I tell you what, Aunt Dorothy," put in Mr. Arnison;

"I really think that, as your nearest male relative, I am fully justified in taking out a Commission of Lunacy on your behalf."

"Very well; thou wilt have to pay the costs thyself, for I was never in fuller possession of my faculties. Don't talk nonsense, Ralph; I *mean* to go, and that as speedily as may be. My faithful Barnes and his good wife will be my representatives at the Grey House; and Simpson, whom the young folks call 'Gurth, the Swineherd,' will look after the animals. There is only one difficulty, and that is Hilda; she cannot stay by herself while I am gone — and heaven only knows when I shall come back again; it may be weeks, or it may be months, before I return—I cannot say. Rose, wilt thou let Flossie and Irene stay with Hilda, turn and turn about, while I am absent?"

"I do not think I can, unless you absolutely require them as housekeepers; but we shall be only too glad to have Hilda at the Blue House again."

"Now, Rose Arnison, that cannot be, and you know it cannot! I will tell our friends here; they will maintain a discreet silence. We do not wish it known, but Louis Michaud has been unfortunate enough to fall in love with my grand-niece, and she will not so much as consider his proposals; she has all but sworn herself to single blessedness. Now, how can she go and live at the Blue House under such circumstances, for Louis cannot be spared from the business?"

"I quite forgot Louis," said Mrs. Arnison; "of course, it would be awkward for both of them, but especially so for Hilda. I know we agreed that she had better not *stay* there again just yet. But I will not have Hilda banished, and very soon, I hope, Louis will get over the disappointment, and we shall go on in our old way."

"Louis might take a longer holiday than usual this year," suggested Mr. Arnison. "He was talking of returning with his parents only last week; and whether he do or not, he will certainly spend some time during the autumn in his native country. There can be no reason why we should not have Hilda *then*."

"Certainly not," interposed Sir Paul; "but I think I can see a way to settle all difficulties. Mrs. Dorothy, if

you must go travelling in the Far West, give Hilda into our keeping, and let Bradenshope be her home till you return. We, on our part, will pledge ourselves to take all due care of her, and to *lend* her to Mr. and Mrs. Arnison whenever they may deem it expedient. What say you, my friend?"

"I say that it is kind and generous in the extreme; but I am not sure that it would be wise to leave Hilda at Bradenshope."

"Why not? It is just what we all wish for; my lady here will second the proposition, and the young people will carry it unanimously. Eh, mamma?"

"We were talking this morning of our resolve to leave no stone unturned to keep Hilda with us as much longer as we could," assented Lady Braden; "Christina was quite sorrowful at the idea of parting with her."

"Christina is very good, and so are you all. What I fear is that Hilda, being accustomed to the luxurious atmosphere of Bradenshope, may become spoilt for the Grey House, and for the useful middle-class life which lies before her."

"I do not think we indulge in much luxury; we live very quietly. Of course, it is only right that we should keep up an establishment. But I do not think we shall hurt your niece in that way, Mrs. Dorothy. And as for the middle-class life you speak of, she is every inch a Capel. Besides, wealthy middle-class life is far more luxurious than that of the old county families. Send Hilda to Underlee House, to the Alderman's, if you wish to show her how much money can purchase, and what unbounded wealth can do. We shall not spoil her in any sense."

"Suppose Walter should fancy her, as Louis did?"

"Suppose he should! We shall be very glad to have our son satisfactorily engaged."

"And would you call such an engagement satisfactory? Remember! Hilda, good and comely as she is, is still her father's daughter! And mind! I don't promise to leave her anything beyond a mere legacy and my diamonds; she is as penniless as King Cophetua's beggar-maid, though not so destitute, and her expectations are simply *nil*."

"You have done your duty, Mrs. Dorothy," said Sir Paul, gravely. "We are willing to take the consequences, should any ensue; Walter does not want money with his wife, but he does want goodness, sweetness, modesty, and culture, as well as grace and beauty, which I must confess the Bradens have ever most fully appreciated. The ladies of Bradenshope have always been 'fair to see.' Also, we will take care that she is not 'spoiled.' Nay! I am not afraid to promise that she shall return to you visibly improved. Is it a bargain, Mrs. Dorothy? What have Mr. and Mrs. Arnison to say?"

A little more serious talk, and it was decided that Hilda should be at home at Bradenshope during her aunt's absence, visiting at the Blue House according to circumstances. And this arrangement being happily concluded, Mrs. Dorothy was in haste to return to the Grey House, where she would have to be exceedingly busy during the next few days. "I shall have," said she, "to set my house in perfect order, because it may be that I may never return. All the servants must have their several tasks assigned them. I shall, of course, leave them on board wages. Many valuables I shall securely stow away, and the plate and jewellery and my old lace I shall send to thee, Ralph—I am not afraid of thieves, it is long since we had a burglary in these parts; but I have a strong belief in prudence, and one of my cherished maxims is, 'Safe bind, safe find.' And, Ralph, if it will not trouble thee too much, thou mightest secure me a berth in the next Transatlantic steamer."

"I will do all you wish, Aunt Dorothy, as you seem perfectly sane, and I have certainly no right to restrain your movements; but I must say I shall be exceedingly glad when I see you once more at your own fireside. Having found your friend, and transacted what little business you may have with him, I suppose you will at once turn your face homewards? You will not make a tour through the country?"

"Really I do not know that I shall not! Of course I shall see Niagara, and I should much like to have a look at Chicago. If one must travel one may as well reap all the advantages. It is quite possible, though, that by the

time I find my friend I may have had enough of it. If I were twenty years younger, I would certainly go from one end of the States to the other, and I would visit Canada. And that reminds me I have a cousin, only about thirty times removed, living in Toronto. But as I never saw her, and she never saw me, and as I am by no means certain whether her name is Smith, or Jones, or Brown, or anything else, I do not think I shall go out of my way to leave my card or lunch with her. Well! if my journey is prospered, as I pray God it may be, if nothing unforeseen should cause delay, I think you may calculate on my return before Christmas. And I may as well say now as later, I shall bring my friend back with me."

"You are very mysterious, Aunt Dorothy," said Mr. Arnison; and then, rather uneasily, "I suppose you are not going to marry your friend?"

"I am not, Ralph Arnison. But I was going to marry him *once!*—it is forty years and more since we were parted by the malice and cunning of my nephew, Hilda's unhappy father, and thy scapegrace brother, Rose, my dear. Harry Rivers and I were engaged for five years; he was poor, and so was I in those days, and all my relatives objected to the match. My nephew George, who was not so much younger than myself—he being the eldest of his generation and I the youngest of mine—was extremely anxious that I should accept a wealthy suitor, who just then unhappily appeared on the scene. You were only a lad then, Sir Paul; but you will remember Archie Lawson, the reported *millionaire!* Well, when my kindred, and especially my brother, George's father, found that I was resolute, they resolved to break off the match, by foul means if they could not by fair. And George it was who undertook the dirty work; they never would have succeeded without him. It was the old story—just what one reads of in novels, but what is common enough in real life; letters were suppressed, and—it is dreadful to say it—they were *forged!* George could always imitate any person's handwriting—a most fatal talent! However, I need not tell all the miserable tale; each believed the other false; we ought to have known better, both of us! We

were bitterly punished for our want of faith, and yet we were too young to suspect the treachery of our enemies. I always say now to lovers—true lovers, I mean—‘If you quarrel, meet face to face, and speak freely and at any cost before you part.’ If we had done so, how much unhappiness would have been spared us.

“The plotters plotted well, and their success was complete. I was free again; Harry left the country; the next thing I heard of him was that he had married and settled in Canada—and that was true! I knew afterwards that he could do nothing else; he saved a girl from the Indians; she was alone in the world, and she clung to him; they were left together in the backwoods—people would say uncharitable things; what could an honourable man do but marry her? He had lost for ever, as he believed, the only woman he loved; he could make a good, innocent, affectionate girl happy, and shield her from much that might have pressed heavily upon her. A little while afterwards I was told that he was dead.”

“Which was an error, intentional, or otherwise?”

“It was an error; and I hope it was ‘otherwise.’ But I believed it from that time till a few days ago, when, all unexpectedly, I learned the truth. Harry is old and poor and infirm; he has always had what people call ‘bad luck.’ If I had married him, all mine would have been his; therefore he has a right now to share all that I possess.”

“His wife is dead, of course?”

“Many years ago; there was one child, at least—a son, who grew to manhood; but he also is dead. I am not sure but that there is a grandchild. So, if Harry will come back he shall, and be master of the Grey House while he lives. We need not make ourselves ridiculous by marrying. People at our age may safely defy scandal, I should think. If not, so much the worse for the scandalmongers; they will not trouble me. So now you know all that is to be known. I would rather Hilda were not told; I shall simply inform her that I am going to America—that duty calls me there—and that she is to remain here, under your care and authority, while I am away.”

And then it was arranged that on the morrow Hilda should be driven to the Grey House that she might make herself useful to her aunt, whose hands would certainly be pretty full if she sailed for New York, as she proposed, during the ensuing week, and to bring away such further portions of her own wardrobe as would be necessary.

To say that Hilda was astonished is only to say what everybody must have anticipated, and she could not help puzzling herself as to the nature of the "important business," which was carrying across the broad Atlantic so staid and settled a personage as the lady of the Grey House. She soon ascertained that Barker was as much in the dark as herself, as regarded the mission on which she was bound; but, as she protested, where her mistress went she would go, though it were to the ends of the earth—where, she had read, the sun never shines, and there is nothing but snow and ice! Or if her mistress chose to ascend a volcano in a state of eruption, she would follow her. She only wished there was a railway from England to New York; and if there could be a *telegraph*, why could there not be a railway, as it was well known railways and telegraphs went together? She had once in her life "crossed the sea," and did not like it at all, as she was so deadly sick she wished some one would drop her into the water! Hilda discovered that the "crossing" was only from Fleetwood to the Isle of Man, and she felt a sort of compassion for the cross old Abigail, who was going to experience miseries of which she had no adequate idea. If Barker had known what really was in store for her; still further, had she guessed on what errand her mistress was bound—it is possible that she might, after all her protestations, have declined to stir from Endlestone.

Mr. Arnison was as good as his word; he secured the required berths, and, moreover, insisted on escorting his aunt and her maid to Liverpool, and seeing them safely on board the *Western Star*. Barker was cross long before she reached Preston, and momentarily put her head out of the window to see if there was not going to be a smash! Then it was very hot and dusty, and the railway officials "put her about" by behaving disrespectfully

to her cherished belongings. With Liverpool and its quay she was naturally disgusted, as being the "biggest, filthiest, noisiest, most confusing place she had ever seen or ever hoped to see!"

Mr. Arnison was surprised, well as he knew Mrs. Dorothy, at her serene composure and quiet interest in all she saw and heard; but he feared greatly she had cumbered herself with a terrible impediment and trial in the person of her dissatisfied, ill-tempered waiting-woman, "Mrs. Verjuice."

CHAPTER XXXII.

CHRISTINA'S STORY.

"No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),
The bosom of his Father and his God."

"AND now we have you safe! You are 'a permanency,' as Susan Nipper observed, for at least three months," was Christina's greeting when, on the morning of Mrs. Dorothy's departure, she drove over to the Grey House to bring Hilda and her personalities back to Bradenshope. Hilda's things were all ready, and she herself had nothing to do save lock up sundry linen-presses which had been left in her safe keeping. Christina insisted on paying a visit to Mrs. Jessie White; and Hilda told her how strange country life had appeared to her when first she arrived at Endlestone; how frightened she was at the cows and the turkeys, and even the geese, which hissed at her as though she were the opposing candidate at a strongly-contested election; and how disgusted with the pigs, and how cautious of the busy bees!

"Were you *very* unhappy?" asked Christina, as, after

quitting the piggeries, they walked up and down the broad gravel walk which bordered the kitchen-garden.

"So unhappy that I do not like even now to think of it; and oh! *so* rebellious. I was as angry as ever Jonah was when his gourd was withered. It was dreadful to me to leave London, where I had always lived in the spring and summer, and also in the winter, when we were not visiting at country houses or staying at Brighton. I should think no miserable creature sentenced to long penal servitude could have felt more hopeless than I when I knew where my lot was to be cast. What a good thing it is that we cannot choose for ourselves!"

"I suppose it is—indeed, I know it is! But, oh, Hilda, it is so hard to feel that all is right when everything seems so very wrong; to say truly, 'Thy will be done,' when that will seems so entirely opposed to ours."

"Ah, Chrissie, don't I know it? And till one can and does kiss the rod, what a bitter, ceaseless struggle life always is!"

"Tell me, then, are you content—really content down in the bottom of your heart, that things should be as they have been? That from being a petted, courted heiress, you should become a poor dependent, forsaken by those in whom you trusted most; that you should leave the scene of all your triumphs, and, worse than this, find yourself betrayed and deceived when you expected to find comfort and protection."

"Yes; I am more than content—I am happy. I ought to be! I should be ashamed of myself were I anything else, for everybody has been, and is, so wonderfully good to me. I begin now to understand Aunt Dorothy, whom I once thought so cold and stern; I know her now for a thoroughly kind, noble-hearted woman, and I know, too, she has had heavy trials of her own, and that she suffered—she never told me how—through my unhappy father; but I am sure—almost sure—he came between her and the man she loved long years ago."

"Yet was not your father Mrs. Dorothy's nephew?"

"He was. There was not so much difference in their ages; she became his aunt when she was quite a little girl. I can never remember my father save as an elderly

man; he married late in life, and I was his only child. He was always very angry with aunt because she inherited the Grey House, which he thought, or said, ought by right to have been his own. But the entail had been broken off, and my grandfather was free to do what he liked with his own. I know Aunt Rose said once, 'Your Aunt Dorothy's estate is hers most righteously; your grandfather was bound in all justice and honour to secure it to her, for she was cruelly wronged in her youth, and he knew it, and, thank God! repented, and made what restitution was possible.' And see how marvellously things come about! If my father had had the Grey House estate, it would have been squandered away with the rest of his patrimony; he would have been none the better for it. As it is, it is now my home—the home of his destitute daughter. Aunt Dorothy has made me feel that, come what may, I shall always be welcome here—just as if I were her child."

"It seems to me, *ma chère*, that you have several homes! There are always the Blue House and Bradens-hope."

"Everybody is so wonderfully kind to me. Ah! there is one blessing in adversity which is sometimes overlooked, I think; it shows us *our real friends*. If I am loved now, it is for myself, not for anything I possess, or am likely to possess. Every friend I have gained since I came to Endlestone I feel to be a genuine friend. What Aunt Rose has been to me I cannot tell you; and uncle, too. I owe them more than life, for they first showed me the beauty of true Christianity, and made me long to be a Christian myself—pardoned and at peace. For you will hardly believe it, Chrissie, but till I learned it from them, I never even dreamed that I wanted pardon, though I did call myself a 'miserable sinner' Sunday after Sunday! As for *peace*, I knew nothing whatever about it. I was idly, carelessly content till sorrow came, and just killed my happiness, such as it was, in those vain, foolish, godless days! No mother could be tenderer than sweet Aunt Rose has been to me. I never knew what a *mother* meant till I lived at the Blue House; and was treated like one of her own children. Oh, Chrissie, it must be a glorious

thing to have such parents as you and my cousins have ! A mother all wisdom and tenderness and unselfishness ; a father all love and strength and truth and noble-mindedness ! Till I saw my uncle with his children, and your father with his, I never knew, never guessed at, the full meaning and pathos of those common, precious words, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’ ! ”

“ I am glad you appreciate papa, Hilda. But he has not been so fortunate—so *blessed*, I should say—as Mr. Arnison has been, so far. Poor papa always says he must have failed somehow in his early training of his eldest-born. Paul was so unlike the rest of us, so different from Walter, who has always, from a little one, gone straight on, turning neither to the right nor to the left, but always pursuing a course of spotless honour and integrity. At school his word was always taken as another boy’s oath might have been ; he was ever generous, thoughtful, and energetic in duty. He was not quite so clever as Paul was, I suppose. Poor Paul could have done everything had he been either diligent, or persevering, or *self-respecting* ; but Walter, as a schoolboy, as a student at Cambridge, and as a son at home, was ever intent on doing the right thing. He has used, and does use, his talents—which are not at all contemptible, mind ! though he has not Paul’s wit and brilliancy.”

“ I should say Mr. Braden had plenty of mother-wit. But I have heard that your elder brother was immensely popular.”

“ His popularity was his ruin. He was a favourite with his schoolfellows, chiefly, I fancy, because he was open-handed and always well-supplied with cash, and because he had such a winning, *débonnaire* way with him. But he was easily led astray ; he never could resist temptation, and he had not the moral courage to say ‘ No.’ ”

“ Don’t talk about him, Chrissie, if it hurts you.”

“ It must always hurt me ; but I want you to know all about him, Hilda. You are to be one of us, you understand ; not a mere guest, but one of ourselves. Besides, you gave me your confidence. You told me that sad story of your faithless lover—or ‘ suitor,’ as you persist in call-

ing him—and I would like to repay it. I have wished before to tell you. I tried to do so that night you came to my room, when you repeated the gipsy's prediction, but something tied my tongue. Let me tell you here—it will be half-an-hour before we start. I can do it so much more easily than at Bradenshope. But did you not know from the Arnisons?"

"I knew what my cousins knew, and no more. My aunt and my uncle kept the secret as closely as if it had been their own; only Alice shared it. Flossie and Irene did not, I know, and, of course, none of the younger children. Still, they had heard something, for Octa, in turning over the photos at the Blue House, told me that there was a sad mystery about Paul Braden's death. The child had some idea that he was *murdered*; but a moment's reflection convinced me that could not be."

"Oh, no—no! I can never remember the time when Paul kept out of 'scrapes,' as we children called our naughty tricks. He was so fond of pleasing himself, and duty always seemed to be so hard to him; nor do I think he was ever quite truthful. Still, everybody loved him; he had such charming manners, even as a child. I forget whether I told you that he was singularly handsome. He was so ready with witty replies and sparkling repartee, it was impossible to be dull in his company. Then, he was so generous—so swift to lend a helping hand to any one who needed it. He did not mind any amount of trouble, if he could thereby serve a friend."

"I do not wonder that he was popular."

"The worst of it was that he was violently impulsive, and he never reflected whether his impulses were good or bad, wise or foolish; they came, and he yielded to them straightway. I have heard him boast that he did everything on the spur of the moment, and he would laugh and say that caution and prudence sat as ill on a young fellow of good birth and fortune as a beard on a woman! He was always in hot water at Eton, and at last he left all in a hurry. Papa was '*advised*' to remove his son! That was the first great shock, for we all knew that it really meant *expulsion*; only for papa's sake, the headmaster, who was an old friend, put it in that way. Paul

was very penitent at first, and he made no end of promises—he *would* be stronger; he *would* resist temptation; there should not be another tear or sigh for him till his life's end. And I am sure he meant it, poor dear boy; he was no hypocrite, though he never had sufficient moral courage to tell the truth when he fancied a lie would shield him from disagreeable consequences.

"So papa believed him, and mamma petted him more than ever, and after awhile he went to Cambridge—to Trinity—and unfortunately he fell in with a fast set, who soon persuaded him to relinquish his idea of becoming a reading-man and going in for honours. What scruples he had they laughed him out of—poor fellow, he never could bear ridicule. In short, his character would have been an exceptionally fine one, for he had splendid traits—he really had! but it was a character without any bones in it!

"He kept three or four terms, and then something happened. He was in very bad odour with the Dons, with whom he and his companions gloried in being at feud; and after several warnings he was *rusticated*. That was dreadful, for '*rustication*,' if it be deserved, is always a terrible and lasting disgrace, and stands sadly in the way of a young man's future career. Also, a great deal came out that made papa extremely vexed and angry. Paul was tremendously in debt; he had scattered money as if it were chaff, and then he had borrowed at frightful interest. At first papa declared that he would not pay these debts, for the tradesmen and the usurers were as much to blame as Paul himself; but to avoid the inevitable *esclandre* which must have ensued, he relented, and settled everything."

"What a grief it must have been to Sir Paul, to Lady Braden, to all of you!"

"Yes, indeed! But the time came when we thought little of it. If only then poor Paul would have been steadfast to the vows he made, if he had redeemed but half his pledges of future good conduct, all might have been atoned for. It would have been an ordinary case of wild oats sown, and reaped, as such sowings invariably are. As his education was still incomplete, papa sent him to Ger-

many, in charge of a tutor, whom he hoped would control him and influence him for good. I think the tutor did his best ; but new scenes brought new dangers, and after a few months the gentleman resigned his post, saying that he could not any longer assume duties which it was impossible to discharge. Mr. Braden had identified himself with the most notorious set in Heidelberg, and no authority of his, no entreaty, no representation, could avail to work even a transient reformation. He was plunging into the wildest excesses ; he drank, he gambled, he was again over head and ears in debt ; he (the tutor) would not for any amount of stipend continue longer at his post. So once more he came back to Bradenshope in disgrace, and as he confessed to me, ‘deeper in the mire than ever.’”

“I think some one told me that you had great influence over him, that he would listen to you when he turned a deaf ear to all other counsel and reproof !”

“It was true ; he did listen to me, and every now and then hope told—or rather *re-told*—her flattering tale, and I tried to believe that at last his heart was touched, his repentance genuine and continuous. Many a time he has wept like a child upon my shoulder, and vowed that old things should be put away, and a new life begun. It was all real enough at the moment—he meant every word he said ; but no sooner had his spirits rallied than vows and protestations were alike forgotten, and he went on worse, if possible, than before.”

“Did I not hear something about his turning artist ?”

“Yes, he was clever as a draughtsman, and he really did love Art. Suddenly a sort of *furore* came upon him, and he fitted up a painting-room, at the top of the house, purchased canvases enough to last a lifetime—colours, palettes, brushes, &c., all in proportion—and for awhile he worked away in his blouse and cap, as if he were earning every meal he ate. Papa would not oppose him, though he did not like it ; he feared it might lead him into Bohemian companionship, and unfit him for the position to which, as heir of Bradenshope, he was born. But, in the meantime, it kept him out of mischief ; his whim was harmless, and, compared with former hobbies, extremely inexpensive. Nevertheless,

when he demanded of his father rather a large sum of money, as he intended studying at Rome, it was refused, chiefly on the ground that he was not to be trusted so far away from home, and without any sort of supervision or control. Whether papa, who had been severely tried, spoke too fiercely, I do not know; but, for the first time, Paul, instead of humbly confessing his delinquencies, turned round upon his father, and behaved most disrespectfully. They quarrelled! My father threatened to send him adrift, to disown him—at the utmost to make him a small allowance, which would keep him from want, and nothing more. Paul was furious; he vowed he would not submit any longer to parental tyranny; he was no longer a boy to be threatened and coerced; he was a man; and, as a man, he would live his own life, and please himself, in spite of opposition. Other angry words followed. Paul forgot himself more and more. My father, who had borne so much, and forgiven so frequently, became deeply offended. They parted as they had never parted before. Next morning Paul was gone! He went, he said, in a note, which was fastened on his easel, to seek his own fortune, to live his own life. Henceforth he would ask his father for nothing. He would and could depend upon his own resources, and he shook off the dust of Bradenshope from his feet, till, in the course of nature, he should be summoned to return to it as its master."

"What a horrible thing to say! I do not wonder that Sir Paul was exasperated."

"No one could wonder; but no one, save mamma and myself, knew how cruelly he was wounded, for Paul had been more to him than any of his children. He was his firstborn, his heir! Mothers and fathers, I have heard say, though they may love their children equally, have nevertheless a peculiar feeling towards their eldest one, which is never repeated, except, perhaps, in the case of the youngest. Paul's conduct was a bitter grief to papa and to mamma. Papa began to age from that day. We were forbidden to mention our brother's name in the family circle; he was taken at his word, and left to do exactly as he pleased, 'to sink or swim,' as he had himself ex-

pressed it. Months passed on, and he wrote now and then to mamma or to myself. He always said he was busy and thriving ; he never asked for money, and he never gave any address; the postmarks on his letters continually varied—now they came from Naples, now from Ravenna, now from Ferrara, and once from Catania. They were wild, incoherent letters, assuring us—his mother and sisters—of his love, but expressing still bitter resentment against his father. At last they ceased, and a whole year passed without one word from him.

"Papa became extremely anxious. Badly as Paul had behaved, the father's heart still yearned over the prodigal, and he *could not* cast him off. He was just making arrangements to send Philip Harwood out to look for him—for he could be traced to Florence—when, without any word of preparation, our brother himself arrived. It was early in May when he came, looking dreadfully ill and worn. He implored forgiveness, declaring that now at last, in very truth, he saw the error of his ways, and had turned for ever from them. Henceforth, if papa would permit it, he would make Bradenshope his settled home, and take up his natural duties and responsibilities as eldest son. I need not say poor papa was only too thankful to receive him, and again, for the fourth time at least, we killed the fatted calf, and made merry. Several weeks after his return we went to London, and Paul with us, but he did not stay ; he seemed to dislike the gaiety of the season, and wished to hurry back again to Bradenshope. We only remained till the end of June, and then we, too, were at home, and the summer was at its height. Paul grew graver, and seemed oppressed by care ; his health failed, he suffered fearfully from neuralgia, he lost his rest night after night, he became languid and feeble. I asked him once if he had anything on his mind, and he answered almost solemnly, '*Much, Christina, but it is not for your ears.*' Then I entreated him to open his heart to papa, who, I was sure, notwithstanding his former displeasure, would help him out of any difficulty. I thought there might be old embarrassments, former entanglements, from which he could not free himself."

"And would he not take your advice? I think if I had done wrong I would as soon confess to Sir Paul as to any one I know. I should have such perfect trust in his generosity and kindness of heart."

"Would that my advice had been taken! I suppose it was the moral cowardice which had always pervaded his character that kept him silent. Perhaps he thought he had sinned beyond forgiveness; perhaps he lacked the physical strength to carry him through such a confession as he must make. Well, Hilda, I must hurry over this part of my story: One morning Paul did not come down to breakfast. We did not think much of that, for he had always been a late riser, and since he had complained of broken nights we had ceased to expect him at any regular time. Mamma ordered a tray to be sent up to him when he rang. Twelve o'clock came and we had not heard his bell; it was mamma—poor mamma—who went to see if he was ill. He was dead, Hilda—*quite dead*; had been dead for hours. He had taken chloroform—the empty bottle lay upon the counterpane."

"But was it not an overdose? People who suffer incessantly from neuralgia are almost *mad*. When I was at school in Paris, one of the governesses was just wild with the agony; and one of the girls heard her praying that she might die. She had chloroform, or something of the sort; but she was not allowed to have it in her own possession; for the doctor said she was not *responsible*, when the paroxysms were at their height! Would it not be so with your brother?"

"We said it was so; we tried hard to believe it; we never hinted even to each other that there *could* be any other cause of death. We did not find the letter, happily, till after the inquest, which was kept very quiet, or the verdict could not have been given as it was—*as it stands!* The jury had scarcely dispersed, when we found,—I found a letter addressed to papa. It contained an extraordinary revelation; an enormous catalogue of debts and liabilities—money borrowed on every side, from usurers; and—that seemed the saddest of all—*post-obit* bonds! There was nothing to be done but to satisfy all these harpies; it was not to be thought of that the world

should learn any particulars of the dreadful history. Papa, therefore, at once examined the accounts, and contested none, though he might easily have done so. Every claim, just or unjust, was fully settled—for now it was indeed *for the last time*.“

“But the embarrassments did not prove that—that there was ——”

“Oh, but it was so. The last sentence of the letter was a tender farewell. He would trouble us no more, he said; besides, he had, in a fit of desperation, ‘*used*’ another person’s name. He could not bring himself to confess to his father; he could obtain no more advances at any price, and ere long the law would punish him, and bring shame upon all his family, as well as life-long disgrace and misery upon himself.”

Both girls were in tears when the sad recital came to a conclusion. In many respects the miserable story of Paul Braden and that of Major Capel were wonderfully alike—the same weaknesses, the same crimes, the same mad recklessnesses, the same awful end! Each had rushed into the presence of his Maker branded with the guilt of suicide.

“Now let us never speak of it any more,” said Christina, striving to regain her composure. “I wanted you to know the exact truth, that you might understand us better and feel like one of us. Papa said I might tell you; we were quite sure you would regard such confidence as sacred.”

“As most sacred! Be assured of it. Nor will I, unless there be urgent cause, ever revert to the subject. For the sake of the living, the dead must be buried out of sight, you know. Only, before we talk of anything else, let me just say one thing: my cousin Flossie had heard that there was some entanglement with an Italian woman—a very wicked woman!—at whose door his ruin mainly lies.”

“It is true, though I do not know that the woman was so utterly to blame. I am afraid—more than afraid—it was Paul who wronged her; he admitted as much. We know nothing of her, nor do we wish to know; it is all over now.”

"Only, Chrissie, it struck me whether the woman whom we call the gipsy might not have something to do with the wretched affair. She might be an Italian, though she came from Corsica."

"I never thought of that. Oh, dear! I hope not; it would be dreadful to have old transgressions raked up, to have to re-open what we trusted was a sealed book. But you said she was elderly, and had been handsome. Paul spoke of a young girl."

"I did not imagine she was the woman herself; she might be the girl's mother, or kinswoman."

"Even if she were, what good could she do by coming here, and prowling about the woods? She knew evidently that Paul was dead; she could not hope to gain anything by annoying any of us."

"I do not think she wished to annoy you, or any one; but I feel sure she came with a motive."

"I wish I knew that she was gone away! Though, after all, I do not know why I should disquiet myself about her; those people, as they wander, learn family histories one from another, and oracular speech is as natural to them as the air they breathe."

"I would not trouble myself if I were you; there is no use in running to meet perplexities half way. I dare say we shall never see her again."

And then the two young ladies went in to their luncheon, and afterwards drove back to Bradenshope, which was to be, for an indefinite period, Hilda's home.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TAPPING THE WEATHER-GLASS.

“ There will we sit upon the rocks,
And see the shepherds feed their flocks ;
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

“ There will I make thee beds of roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cup of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.”

HILDA was surprised to find how much it felt like coming home, when she began to unpack in her own room at Bradenshope. How bright it looked after the sombre, old-fashioned chamber called hers at the Grey House ! how smoothly everything seemed to go after the busy week she had just spent, and after so many domestic functions, paraded before the world rather than retired from view—for Mrs. Dorothy, who was certainly a wonderful manager and a true woman of business, had no idea of keeping her household machinery out of sight ! And Hilda was rather tired of the pigs, which had been the theme of many a conversation during the last few days, their affectionate mistress deeply deplored the necessity of leaving several interesting families to the care of the subordinates.

“ And it would be of no use to leave *thee* here in charge, Hilda,” the old lady had said on the eve of her departure. “ Thou takest no real interest in the swine ; thou wouldest, perhaps, feed the poultry and pet the peacock and the guinea-fowl, but the four-footed things thou wouldest never concern thyself about. Thou art not cut out for a farmeress ! ”

“ I am afraid I am not, aunt. I really think Gurth will attend to the creatures far better than myself, and he and Barnes are entirely to be trusted, I feel sure,” replied Hilda, trembling lest Mrs. Dorothy should reconsider the policy of her proposed long visit at Bradenshope, and

leave her to hold sway as vice-queen at the Grey House. She need not have feared ; Mrs. Dorothy would quite as soon have thought of getting herself appointed Prime Minister as of installing her niece in authority over Mrs. Jessie White and her squealing progeny !

And now all the bustle was over, the packing for America was all done, and Mrs. Dorothy and Barker, with their highly-respectable luggage, were on their way to New York. The antique plate and other valuables were safely lodged at the Blue House, and the various presses and *armries*, and the old cedar-wood chests, were locked up, inventories and all, and the keys were safe in a corner of Hilda's largest trunk.

The weather was again superb, and the country was all the better for the wet fortnight, which had made so many people grumble. Now was the time for picnics, flower-shows, and garden-parties. The Misses Braden were invited to several *al fresco* entertainments, but they could not as yet make up their minds to re-enter society, even in their own country, and it was resolved that till after Emily's marriage the retirement of the last few months should not be broken.

"I only hope you will not be too dull with us," said Agnes that evening to Hilda, as they were rambling together in the shrubberies. "Mamma cannot bear the idea of going out and meeting people in the old way, as if nothing had happened ; and none of us really care much for festivities. We are quite contented to stay at home and receive our real friends in an informal style, as we did the other day when Mrs. Dorothy and Mr. Carew dined here. And it is a great boon having you with us so comfortably. I do trust you will not get tired of us."

"There is no fear of it. The Grey House is not so quiet, because there is the business of the farm always going on, and men are continually coming in for orders ; but as regards society, so-called, one could not possibly see less of it than there. I am afraid that I shall be only too happy here—that I shall be spoiled, and dislike returning to home duties when my aunt comes back again. But while I am with you, you must let me help you in the school, and in all that is to be done."

"If you want that sort of employment, you must go to Christina. She knows more about our people than any one else, and she is very anxious to get her school into good working order again. We call it her school, because she has had the entire control ever since Mary married, and the schoolmistress is of her selection. Christina, as you know, takes one of the classes most days, and she constantly examines the girls' sewing. She has such a queer notion, too, in her head, of a *cooking-school* in the village! Has she said anything to you about it?"

"She just mentioned it, and I encouraged the idea. My cousins have done a little in that way at Endlestone. Some of the poorest women cannot even manage to cook a plate of porridge without spoiling it, and Alice and the others have been trying to teach them the uses and the value of herbs and vegetables, which everybody here may have for next-to-nothing. You should taste Irene's stews, made of a very little meat and plenty of good vegetables. And Alice taught some of the girls who were going out to service how to make *omelettes*."

"That is just the kind of thing Christina wants to do. She would not like any fuss made, but her great desire is to help our poor neighbours to help themselves, to teach them to avoid waste, and to show them how many things may be turned to the best advantage. Now, I think if you and Christina will join hands in this matter, a great deal may be done, and that in a quiet, but most effectual way."

"I should like to be as useful as I can. But as regards yourself—will you not take a share in the business?"

"Not at present—not till after Emily is married. It was settled while you were away that, as there was nothing to wait for, and as we have all known Philip Harwood from a boy, the wedding should take place early in the spring."

"But that is a long way off! We are only in July."

"Months soon pass away, and there will be the settlements and the *trousseau*. What a craze it is, getting such heaps of clothes when you are going to be married. One would imagine a matron was never allowed to purchase anything fresh. Philip did press for an earlier day—he wanted it to be in October—or, if that might not be, a few days before Christmas. But papa said he could not

part with his youngest girl so suddenly, and Emily herself objected to being married in the winter. You may be sure I was not anxious to hasten events. I shall be like a left-hand glove without its fellow when Emily is gone."

"You and Christina must enter into mutual compact, and your brother must ally himself with both of you."

"There is some talk—it is only talk yet—of Walter entering upon residence at Arnheim Towers. Papa seemed to think there ought to be some one there, occasionally, at least; he does not feel much confidence in Bluff the bailiff."

"What is that about Arnheim Towers and old Bluff?" said a voice from behind the Portugal laurels; and the next instant Walter appeared. "It is precisely about Arnheim that I want to talk to you."

"And what have you to tell us about Arnheim?"

"Have you forgotten our scheme of going over there and exploring the old place, especially the ruins? And I thought Miss Capel wanted to see the heath where the wild cattle gained their famous victory."

"We have not forgotten it, by any means," said both the girls.

"And I have not, I assure you. It was useless to make any arrangements while that deluge of rain was falling; and then Emily's engagement engrossed our attention for some days, and afterwards, when the weather was clearing, and the barometer rising, Miss Capel was returning to the Grey House. But now I think everything is propitious—the weather and the powers-that-be included. Will you be my guest, Miss Capel, the day after tomorrow?"

"With pleasure, provided Lady Braden and your sisters make no objection."

"The *mater* agrees, and so does Christina. Phil and Emily will consent to anything that does not put them asunder. And—Miss Capel—guess where I went this afternoon?"

"How can I? Even Lady Braden was not in your secret."

"No! I simply left word that dinner was not to be

delayed on my account, as I was going for a long ride, and had business at Endlestone."

" You did not go to the Blue House ? "

" That is just where I did go ; and in her own heart I am sure the dear old *mater* knew I was there, because we had agreed together that several of your cousins ought to be with us at Arnheim. However, I thought I would not disclose the object of my embassy till I could report its success."

" And what does Aunt Rose say ? "

" She will not join the party herself, and Flossie is still at York with the Goodmans; but Irene accepts, and so does Theodore ; and I was just coming away, when I bethought myself of my favourites, Cynthia and Octa, and after some little hesitation, their mother consented for them, if Irene would consider herself in charge."

" How indignant Cynthia would be if she knew of that stipulation. She wishes so particularly to be ranked with the grown-up girls ; nothing offends her so much as being classed with the children."

" She is womanly enough sometimes. But when she came in and knew what was in store for her, she informed me that I was ' a blessed dear,' and ' a regular brick,' and seizing me round the waist, she waltzed up and down the room with me till she was out of breath, to Mrs. Arnison's consternation—not unmixed with amusement, I fancy. I was afraid after that she would be considered as too wild to be trusted out of bounds, but I left the Blue House with the distinct understanding that the three girls and Theodore would be here precisely at ten o'clock on Thursday morning."

" I am so glad ; I shall have Irene the whole day."

" Don't flirt with Irene the whole day. I have an insuperable objection to young ladies flirting—with each other ! "

" A very safe away of indulging in the amusement," laughed Hilda ; " no one is compromised, and no one has to suffer any consequences. But I always thought that the verb to flirt—such an ugly, vulgar verb, is it not?—required *Lui* as well as *Elle*."

" In exactness, I suppose it is so ; but you and Chrissie

firt shamefully, and I think you both deserve reproof. Well!—nonsense apart—does the scheme please you? Shall you be ready to start for Arnheim at eleven?"

"What is the day's programme?" asked Agnes.

"We drive straight to Arnheim—I shall ride; and I dare say Theodore will have no objection to mount Cox-comb. We can take the shady wood way, and I think, Agnes, we had better go round by Bradensghyll. Miss Capel has never seen the waterfall there, and she ought to stand on the rocking-stone, and wish her wish, which she is certain to obtain, if only she observe the proper formulæ."

"That must be for mamma to decide," said Agnes; "it will take us three miles out of our way, and there will be no shade on Lingmoor, which we must cross to get to the waterfall. And you would have to walk a mile there and a mile back, Hilda; for no sort of vehicle could possibly get to the rocky side of Lingmoor—the ground is all broken, and tumbled over with boulders; as if so many Titans had been playing at football there a few years before the creation of the world! All this part of the country has, you see, a very 'Stonehenge-like propensity,' as Philip Harwood says."

"Never mind the boulders! there is plenty of smooth greensward between them; the only troublesome piece is the crumbly rock as you descend the *ghyll*, and I will take all care of you then, Miss Capel. And you are tolerably sure-footed."

"How do you know that, Mr. Braden?"

"By your walk; you neither trip, nor stump, nor move along like a Dutch doll with stiff joints—supposing a Dutch doll could move along! Your figure is elastic, and your feet evidently belong to you."

"I thought everybody's feet belonged to them—even a cork leg is personal property."

"Property? Yes! I meant, however, that your feet were altogether at your own disposal. Some people are born sure-footed, some are not; some naturally preserve their centre of gravity, others quite as naturally slip and slide this way and that, and, as a matter of course, come to grief, and continually sprain their ankles, break

their bones, dislocate their joints! Now I can see you poise yourself exactly, and could keep your true balance under almost any circumstances. Besides, the *ghyll* is not by any means a dangerous place; you may always make sure of your steps beforehand, and I know every inch of the ground."

"I hope you will give us plenty to eat and drink at Arnheim!" said Agnes. "The last time we went there was no white bread, and only fat bacon and hard cheese in the larder."

"I have already taken counsel with Mrs. Maxwell, Agnes. Of course, I am entertainer, and I do not mean to starve my guests. At your last visit to Arnheim you rode over without any notice, and Mrs. Bluff had gone to the hiring at Croxton Fair. I shall go to Arnheim myself to-morrow, to make preparations, and I really think, Agnes, you might accompany me; women perceive the little things that have so much to do with comfort more quickly than men, and I want to have a really pleasant day, without a drawback. Mrs. Bluff will make but a poor counsellor. Her idea of a banquet is plenty of 'berry pasties' and a rice-pudding, with spice and plums in it, fried ham and eggs, buttermilk, and the inevitable oatmeal cakes, and perhaps a little honey."

"And no despicable fare, either!" cried Hilda. "Quite an Arcadian banquet, I should call that. Now what will you give us, Mr. Braden?"

"Well! since the Arcadian *menu* seems to please you, I think we had better leave it all in the hands of Mother Bluff. Her catering is good of its sort, though I cannot say I quite appreciate her spruce-beer, and I would not advise any one to drink deep of a certain home-made wine of hers, which, though not excessively alcoholic, is extremely apt to give one unpleasant sensations afterwards. You shall have milk and honey, Miss Capel—new milk—and rich cream, and wild strawberries and raspberries—they are to be had by basketfuls for the gathering—and there will be oat-cakes, and the ham and eggs, of course, and trout, just out of the lake, and plenty of herbs and wild roses."

"A most pastoral bill of fare! But shall we be ex-

pected to eat the herbs—rosemary and rue, to wit!—and the wild roses?"

"No; those are for the delectation of the finer senses. And I shall sit upon a bank where the wild thyme grows, and pipe to you, as a rustic swain should; though I am sadly afraid I am not quite certain what a 'pipe' is, save as a vulgar thing in which you smoke tobacco, if you happen to have so bad a taste, when ladies are *not* present. But I beg to say no Braden—that is, no good Braden—ever smoked. It is not their vice to make chimneys of themselves. Then there are *Pandean* pipes and *bagpipes*; but I am not, so far as I know, descended from 'the great' god Pan, nor am I a braw Highlander. I am afraid I cannot play *a pipe*, or *the pipes*, on the happy occasion; and my flute has asthma, or chronic bronchitis, I am not sure which; but it is laid up in ordinary. The only thing upon which I can 'discourse sweet music' is the organ, and that is an instrument which can scarcely be called portable. We will go into the lumber-rooms to-morrow, Aggie, and perhaps we may find something to serve our turn. The bank with the 'wild thyme' will be sure to be there."

"But not the oxlips," said Agnes. "Hilda, did it ever strike you that Shakspere was no botanist?"

"I cannot say it ever did."

"Well, I think I have right on my side. You see, he puts oxlips and violets on his bank of wild thyme. Now, oxlips are doubtful wildlings, and are quite out of flower in June, when wild thyme first appears; as for violets, the scented ones, at least, are long over when the thyme blooms. The pansy is out then, and so is the scentless dog-violet; and there is the marsh-violet, but that would not grow on a dry and sunny bank, such as suits wild thyme."

"Shakspere does not say that he expects to find them all at once! Besides, in a fairy tale, like the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, what is to hinder June roses and Christmas roses growing lovingly together? cowslips and china asters? snowdrops and sunflowers?"

"If you put it in that way, I am silenced, of course; but I still think Shakspere was no better botanist than Milton."

"Listen to her, Hilda—Miss Capel. She is maligning the poets! She will next declare that Chaucer mistook the peony for the daisy! I am afraid that botanists are a dreadful priggish set."

"But, Walter, you know that Milton really must have been 'all at sea' when he talked about the

"Sweetbriar and the vine,
And the twisted eglantine."

For the sweetbriar and eglantine are *one*, whereas he evidently imagined it to be the woodbine or honeysuckle."

"It would seem so from his calling it '*twisted*'; but, Aggie dear, botany was not a popular study in that day."

"It is not too popular now, for there came a *Mudie's* novel in the last box which tells you how the hero and heroine sat under the flowering limes, and enjoyed their fragrance, together with that of the lilac and hawthorn."

"Why, even I, town-bred as I am, always knew better than that!" cried Hilda. "The limes are scarcely in leaf when the lilac bloom is fading. Lilac and hawthorn flower in May; limes about Midsummer, but generally a little later. It is just possible a lingering, dying spray of white-thorn *might* say 'How d'ye do?' to a precocious young lime-blossom, but it is most improbable. And lilac and lime never *could* be fragrant together."

"Might not a late spring and an early summer do it?" asked Walter, delighted to get the girls into an argument.

"Lilacs *never* flower at Midsummer or in July, nor limes in May," replied Hilda, with emphasis. "And, of course, Milton did confound the eglantine and woodbine. Men of genius are not bound to know everything."

"Well," responded Agnes, "one may forgive both Shakspere and Milton, for the sake of their genius. I am thankful to say, though, that Tennyson is wonderfully accurate in his botanical allusions—in all his references to natural science. But if one writes a novel of the day one ought to be careful not to group incongruities."

"To come back to actual life, will you go with me to-morrow, Agnes? I don't quite rely on myself for doing the thing properly, unassisted; and I want Arnheim to show to advantage."

"Certainly, I will do all you require; but if I am to be responsible in any degree, I think I had better have a little private conversation with Mrs. Maxwell before we set out. Mrs. Bluff will not afford us much help, and I propose that everything should be sent on early from Bradenshope, only relying on Arnheim for milk and butter and honey, and, perhaps, fruit."

"But you never gave Agnes the programme she asked for," interposed Hilda. "You took us over the woods as far as the waterfall, and there left us. I hope there is nothing ominous in that. I, for my part, should like to go on to Arnheim, about which I have heard so much."

"And so you shall. Having explored the waterfall, and admired the *ghyll*, and the little Black Tarn upon which the sun never shines, we shall continue our journey to Arnheim. Arrived there, we shall lunch, or rather *dine*, for we are to come back to supper, I believe. Then we shall form into parties, or into couples, perhaps—I, as castellan, claim the privilege of being your guide to the old tower and to the church, where I don't know how many generations of Bradens are awaiting the great uprising day. At five o'clock we will have high tea, or later, if it suits better—Agnes, mind we take some of that guava jelly Miss Capel likes so much! After tea, we will wander about according to our own sweet wills, and set off on the return journey whenever it shall please our sovereign lady, the queen-mother, to give the signal."

"Is there no musical instrument at Arnheim?"

"There is a spinet, I believe, in one of the unused rooms; and when we were children we had a banjo there—don't you remember, Agnes? And I am almost sure there is an infirm accordion, not to speak of a Jew's-harp!"

"Sufficient for an instrumental concert. Here comes Christina."

There was a little more conversation on the subject of the Arnheim excursion, and then the first prayer-bell was heard, and all hurried towards the house. The next day both Agnes and Walter were missing at the luncheon-table, and it was understood that they were making preparations at Arnheim Towers. "Walter, of course, is our host," said Lady Braden, "and I have nothing to do with

our entertainment; but Mrs. Maxwell has undertaken to 'serve the refreshments,' so I shall feel no anxiety on the score of possible shortcomings. It will be a sort of indoor picnic; if we should have a shower, it will not so much matter."

"Do not think of such a thing!" cried Emily; "half an hour's rain would wet the grass and spoil all our pleasure. But it will not rain—I feel sure of it; and I feel sure, too, that we are going to have a very happy day."

"I am sure, my dear, I hope you will," said Lady Braden, just a little sadly.

Walter and his sister returned to dinner, reporting that there certainly would be bread, and milk, and cheese, and cresses for the guests, and that Mrs. Bluff was in an excellent temper, and was determined on distinguishing herself and doing all honour to the occasion. Also, they were convinced that the weather would be superb, the glasses were almost at "set fair," and were still steadily rising; there was every sign of a brilliant to-morrow.

After dinner all the young people went to a certain knoll, whence could be obtained a wide view of the horizon, and whence the sunset could be seen. All was propitious; the sun went down in a sea of crimson and purple, that faded presently into that clear, warm amber that betokens his fair uprising in the East a few hours later. The wind, what there was of it, came from the north; the pretty pimpernel kept its eyes broad open as long as the daylight lasted, and the busy gnats made a moving column far above their heads.

And when they came back into the house by the servants' entrance they saw several large hampers packed, and ticketed "with care," standing ready to be put into the cart, which was to start at eight o'clock next morning. Mrs. Maxwell, with some lighter packages, was to be driven over by one of the men-servants an hour later. Emily went upstairs, singing—

"The night-winds come and go, mother, upon the meadow-grass,
And the happy stars above them seem to brighten as they
pass:
There will not be a drop of rain the whole of the live-long day,
And I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother—I'm to be Queen o'
the May."

And then, turning to her lover, who was close behind her: "How I do wish, Philip, you had waited till to-morrow to propose; I should so much have liked to become engaged at Arnheim Towers!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DAY AT ARNHEIM.

"For the strength of the hills we bless Thee,
Our God, our fathers' God."

It was a beautiful July morning, and Emily's prophecy seemed pretty certain to be verified. All the household, save the heads of it, were stirring early, and it was reported that Mrs. Maxwell and two maids who were going to Arnheim as her aides-de-camp were seen piling up hampers in the kitchen-yard as early as half-past three.

Hilda opened her window rather more than an hour later, and putting out her head to have a good look at the fells—whence, according to North-country politics, all the weather comes—she saw another head projected among the noisette roses at about three yards' distance—Christina, with her hair all loose, and her shoulders covered with her white dressing-jacket. "Good morning!" cried both the girls simultaneously; and then Hilda: "What a magnificent day we shall have!"

"Yes, it looks quite like it! And how sweet the air is! There has been a heavy dew, though the grass was so dry last night. See! there are drops even in these rose-cups. And oh, Hilda! what a beautiful glow on Croxton Ridge; the sun must be just below the fells on the other side. How delightful the early morning-air is at this time of the year."

"Is it not! Shall we dress and go out?"
"What time is it?"

"About a quarter to five ; and I fancy the servants are up, and the house is open."

"Do you know I think we should be wiser to remain quietly indoors, for we have a long day before us, and there will be plenty of walking and climbing at Arnheim. It is almost a pity we awoke so early. We are just like children getting up with the sun in anticipation of a holiday."

"But it is scarcely worth while going to bed again, and if one dresses one does not care to remain upstairs."

"We need not dress just yet ; we shall not breakfast much before nine o'clock. I will come to your room as I am, if you will let me, and we can have a cosy chat."

"Just what I should like ; talking from our windows is rather inconvenient, and we might disturb some one who was not so wakeful as ourselves."

And, in another minute, Christina was in Hilda's room, and they both sat down on the bed, and prepared, as they said, for "a good long talk about everything." But ere they had chatted one half-hour, they began to gape, and presently they thought they might just as well lay their heads on the pillows, and, having done so, conversation slackened, and very soon they were fast asleep, and might have slumbered till far into the morning had not Agnes, fully dressed, come in and roused them.

"You lazy girls !" she cried. "Do you know what time it is ? Papa is out on the terrace, and Phil and Emily are gone to feed the pheasants. And the morning is simply splendid ! What a very odd idea to be sleeping in your *peignoirs* ! "

Christina explained ; and then, looking at Hilda's watch, she discovered that their impromptu nap had lasted almost three hours. The dew was all dried up now, and the sun was no longer reddening the higher mountain-slopes, but shining clear and bright over all the plain. The young ladies felt that speedy dressing would be desirable. At the same time, they were all the better for the sleep that had surprised them.

Punctually at ten o'clock arrived Theodore and his sisters, and Irene and Hilda had a quiet talk before setting out for Arnheim. Alice and John had returned home,

and were very well, and, of course, very happy ; and Alice felt herself quite an old married woman, now that the wedding-trip was fairly over, and her household duties about her. And there was news, too, of Mrs. Dorothy. The *Western Star* had been spoken off the coast of Ireland, and a packet of letters had been taken on board, among them a few hastily-written lines from the lady of the Grey House. She was tolerably well herself, and in excellent spirits ; the unfortunate Barker was deadly sea-sick, and was sure there must be a wicked Jonah on board, the vessel rolled about so dreadfully ! Theodore declared he would give his best bat to see Mrs. Verjuice in all the agonies of *mal-de-mer* ; and as sea-sickness was said to be good for some constitutions, he hoped it might improve her ladyship's unamiable temper. Cynthia was in the wildest spirits. She had never been to Arnheim *really*, she explained ; she had only seen it in the distance when driving on the Sandside Road. She was very sorry they were not going to have dinner out-of-doors, or, at least, among the ruins of the old Tower. It was such fun to sit on the grass, and see people carving things on their knees, and to find the mustard was forgotten, and the pepper turned into the cream, and the salt all over the pudding, and the jam-tarts broken up in the dinner-napkins !

To which Irene gravely replied that such a chapter of accidents might be very delightful to little girls, but could scarcely amuse a party of grown-up people, who preferred to dine decently ! A speech which completely subdued poor Cynthia, who had come out that morning in a longer dress than usual. She had surreptitiously let down a tuck in the under-skirt, determined to behave herself as a discreet young woman should. And here, at the very commencement, she was treated as Stella or Olive might have been, and openly called "a little girl" in the presence of Mr. Braden and Mr. Harwood.

Lady Braden had decided that the *détour* to Bradens-ghyll had better not take place ; it could be visited another day when a further journey was not in prospect. At the appointed time everybody was ready, the ladies were comfortably packed in the carriage, and the gentlemen

mounted, Theodore, nothing loth, on Coxcomb ; and Sir Paul gave the signal to proceed.

It was a beautiful wooded country through which they went, and under the shadow of the fells, so that they were not incommoded by the sun, which now began to pour down its noontide rays ; till, having passed through a deep but short ravine, they emerged upon a tract of open moorlands covered with heath and ling ; and now, far away, they could see Arnheim Towers before them. Another half-hour's journey, however, brought them into the park, which, though far less extensive than that of Bradenshope, was even more picturesque. It commanded bolder views of the Lake Mountains, and, in several places, glimpses might be caught of the great tidal river, or, rather, estuary, shining through the breaks in the woodland slopes of the wide tableland on which the demesne of Arnheim was situated.

When they had passed the lodge, where a very old woman courtsied down to the ground, and almost cried, at the sight of Lady Braden, who had not visited Arnheim for four years or more, Walter rode on, that he might be ready to receive his guests at the threshold ; for Sir Paul had insisted on his taking the part of host, and welcoming his family and friends in the character of master of the house. This had been settled when the excursion was first proposed. Walter had gone to his father to consult whether it would be wise to ask his mother to accompany the girls to Arnheim, and whether he would object to go himself. Sir Paul had replied, “ I will go, Walter, on one condition—that you at once take your proper position as master of Arnheim. No one has lived there since I succeeded my father at Bradenshope. Arnheim is our most ancient possession, and it ought not to be deserted. Your brother should have been there now ; he ought to have been there long ago, with his wife and his children about him—but—alas ! ”

“ Do not pain yourself, father,” replied Walter, “ by reverting to that most mournful topic. Do you wish me to settle at Arnheim according to the usage of the heirs of Bradenshope ? ”

“ I do. I wish you in the best sense of the word to

settle there. It is quite time, Walter, you thought of marriage. I should like to see you a father before I die."

"I wish nothing better myself, sir, and I have only waited for a fitting opportunity to speak to you on the subject. I have thought of marriage lately far more than I have ever thought of it before. I always intended to become a Benedict some time or other when I came across the right woman, but I was in no hurry. Now, however, I confess I am looking forward to a change of estate far more definitely."

"You have, then, seen the lady you desire to make your wife?"

"Father, I have. And I hope—I *think*—you cannot be displeased at my choice. You and my mother are certainly to blame if you chide me for loving the girl you have thrown in my way—almost, as it were, on purpose."

"If it is Hilda Capel to whom you refer—"

"Father! as if I could refer to any one else!"

"If you had waited to hear the end of my sentence, you would have found that I did not suppose you were referring to any other girl, and I should have added that I entirely commend your choice. You have my consent and your mother's too, to make Hilda Mrs. Braden and mistress of Arnhem as soon as you can gain *hers*."

"I am so thankful to hear you say it. I was just a little afraid you might disapprove, not because she is utterly dowerless, but on account of her father's dis-honour."

"Walter! what right have we to speak of any dis-honour which is not personal? Are we not equally dis-honoured? If all were known, we might be even more deeply disgraced, for Major Capel had long been self-expatriated. He was a Frenchman in all but birth; we are among our own people, and in our own country, where too much—too much is known, and the rest, I fear me, guessed! The girl herself is pure and good and true-hearted—a girl after my own heart—or I had not had her here among your sisters, nor had I sanctioned any intimacy between you and her. Bring her to me as your betrothed, and I will take her to my heart as a daughter of my house."

"A thousand thanks. But I fear to speak; Christina tells me she dislikes the idea of marriage."

"She thinks she does, and no wonder. That fellow Trelawny threw her over the moment her father's ruin was disclosed. He had wooed the heiress, not the woman, and the moment the heiress had disappeared Hilda herself was nowhere. It was enough to shake her trust in man; enough to make her shun the idea of a second suitor. To tell you the truth, only it is a secret, Louis Michaud proposed to her, in French fashion—through his mother."

"Louis Michaud! A very good young man, and one to be respected; but by no means the husband for my beautiful, stately Hilda; and he was refused?"

"Absolutely, and without the smallest hesitation; and Hilda has, more than once, declared gravely that she means to live and die a spinster."

"A spinster! Then she ought to reside on a desert island, where there are no men to appreciate her sweetness and her worth. You are quite sure that M. Michaud made no terms?"

"No terms whatever. It is rather awkward, you see, for it shuts her out from the Blue House for the present, as Louis, who is a clever fellow, and a man of science, cannot, at this juncture, be spared from the 'Works.' If Bradenshove had not been open to her, the poor girl must have moped alone at the Grey House, while Mrs. Dorothy was absent."

"I am delighted to think Bradenshove *was* open to her, and is open to her, for her whole life-long, if she chooses."

"And God grant that she may choose! I want you married, my boy, and I want you married to Hilda, and none else. For once the old man and the young man agree in such a business. Let her be the young man's love, and she may count upon being the old man's darling, and the old woman's also, for your mother thinks as I do, Walter. And may you two be as happy in each other as we have been, and shall be to the end, I well believe. All the tempests that have visited us since we were wed have come from without. It has been all peace and comfort and trust within. But don't go and make a rush at Hilda. You won't take her by storm. Talk to Christina

before you speak out; she knows more of her friend's inner life than any one here. It would be perplexing if she refused you while she is our guest; and she *may* refuse you, lad. She won't say 'yes' unless she can say it with all her heart; and with her it will be *yes*—or *no*! She is not the girl to be ignorant of her own mind. She will not play with you—*no!* not for one five minutes! If, when you ask her, she does not refuse, she will be your wife; shilly-shally is quite too contemptible for her. But take my advice, Walter—*don't ask her in too great a hurry.* First win her regard——"

"I do hope, father, I have won that."

"I believe you have. But you must win her love before you ask her hand. Leave her to find out that she cares for you. Do not speak out—*yet.*"

"I feel you are right. But it is a terrible temptation when there are so many opportunities—when I am seeing her every hour of the day. And she is very gracious."

"Too gracious, perhaps. A gentlewoman may so easily be 'gracious' to a gentleman of whom she never dreams as a lover. But she will be yours, my boy—she will be yours, I am persuaded, if you go about your wooing prudently. Only it will not be a mere case of proposing and accepting. With the ordinary girl—and God knows I would rather you waited till I was dust and ashes than that you should wed with such an one!—with the ordinary girl, I say, it is but to ask and have. Hilda is of another metal."

But for this caution, and for a few words dropped by Christina in private conversation, Walter Braden would have proposed to Hilda Capel on this very day, and asked her to enter Arnheim as its future mistress. He was wise enough, however, to profit by the admonitions he had received, and defer his proposals for the present. Nevertheless, it seemed understood that he should be Miss Capel's *cavaliere-servente* through the day.

First, before any other lady, she was by Mr. Braden assisted from the carriage and led into the hall, and Mrs. Maxwell and the maids at once paid this favoured guest all possible attention. Mrs. Bluff, who was not naturally deferential to her superiors, courtsied low, and insisted on

calling Hilda "my lady." The banquet was spread in the great hall—a low, wide room with open fireplaces at each end, filled now with rushes, flowers, and greenery. Stag antlers and horns were disposed on the dark oak panels, and among the latter Walter pointed out an awful-looking black pair, which had once adorned the head of one of the famous wild bulls—only the third or fourth in descent from the identical animal who led the herd on its first appearance in the country.

The repast did honour to Mrs. Maxwell and her coadjutors; some of the ancient plate of the house was displayed, and the table was beautifully decorated with flowers. There were so many good things that Cynthia no longer wished for an *al fresco* entertainment; nothing could be more charming, she told her mother on her return, than dining in such a dear old place, with ancient armour and stags' horns on the walls, and coats of arms and heraldic devices all over the ceiling, and two great painted windows, and flowers and ferns everywhere, and lots of fruit, and such delicious creams; strawberries and raspberries, like blackberries for quantity; and heaps—positive *heaps*—of apricots and peaches from the forcing-houses at Bradenshope. Oh, it was a thousand times better than any ordinary picnic!

Lady Braden declined to take the head of the table. "That is your place, Walter," she said; "and Christina must take the opposite end. Hilda will, of course, sit at your right hand. As this is really only an informal family gathering, at which the Arnisons are so kind as to assist, the girls must do without any regular partners. Philip, of course, takes Emily, and Christina has just claimed Theodore. Your father and I will go together, like old-fashioned folk, as we are; so Agnes, Irene, and Cynthia must take care of each other. I told Irene we should be short of *beaux*."

"All right, mother; Agnes and Irene will get on capitally, and Christina will look after Miss Cynthia, and see that she gets into no madcap scrape. Phil and Emily are sure to go mooning off into some solitude, so you see Hilda falls quite naturally to me."

"That is what I wished; you take her as a matter of

course, your father and I will sit on your left hand. We are not a very large party." This conversation took place in the drawing-room, in which everything was faded, tarnished, and venerable. The brocaded curtains had long since lost their brilliant colouring; the carpet was dull of hue, the chairs and table were of ancient date, the mirrors curiously framed, the girandoles were sadly in need of a little fresh gilt, and the spinet of which Walter had spoken was really a harpsichord—a celebrated harpsichord! inasmuch as the great Handel himself had once played upon it. But the *china*, which stood upon spindle-legged inlaid tables, and in curious *bric-à-brac* open cabinets, was something marvellous; and Hilda, who had quite a passion for different kinds of pottery, was in raptures with the wonderful plates and dishes, and tea-services, and monsters that were collected here, wasting their "sweetness on the desert air" of solitary Arnheim.

"What a splendid collection!" said Hilda, when Lady Braden, knowing her tastes, had introduced her to several wondrously ugly teapots, and some rare Palissy ware that in the present *china* fever would have been almost worth its weight in gold.

"Yes, my dear," replied her ladyship; "a very fine collection. The ladies of our house have always had a *penchant* for this kind of thing, and from generation to generation have added to the stock. I am glad you like it."

"But why keep it here, dear Lady Braden? Why not remove it to Bradenshope, and give it the benefit of a proper display? It is worthy of most museums."

"So I have been told; but it is not mine to remove. All that is here belongs to Arnheim; it is Walter's now, and must not be interfered with. When he marries, he will bring his wife home here, where my husband brought me more than thirty years ago; and should I survive my husband—which God forbid!—this would be my dower-house. But though the *china* and some other things are well enough, this room, and, indeed, all the best rooms, must be entirely new-furnished before Walter marries."

"Is that likely to be soon?" asked Hilda. Whether

she asked the question quite innocently, I should not like to decide.

"I cannot say," replied Lady Braden, just a little consciously. "His father and I are very anxious to see him happily and suitably married; and—and—well, we have hopes that—that—ere long he will be engaged."

Hilda was silent. She was saying to herself—"Who is it, I wonder? I am very glad, though, because now I can be quite free with Walter—as much at my ease with him as with Mr. Harwood. I am sure she will be a very happy woman whoever she is, and what a lovely old home she will have! I hope she is worthy of it all!"

And again and again Hilda assured herself that she was "very glad." Notwithstanding, there was just a little cloud upon her spirits when she went in to dinner on Walter's arm. The day did not seem so bright, nor the flowers so fresh. Could there be thunder in the air? But before the repast was over she was her own happy self again, and she was quite ready, when invited, to join the party who were going to ramble over the Heath, and explore the ruins, some of them for the twentieth time. Philip and Emily, as was predicted, soon disappeared. Theodore and Christina were joined by Agnes and Irene, and they at once set out for the woods which sloped gradually into a lovely cove of the great estuary. Lady Braden stayed indoors for her afternoon's nap, and Sir Paul kept her company, saying that presently he would go and have a look at the gardens. So it came to pass that Walter Braden had Hilda all to himself.

First of all he showed her the gardens, and told her he was thinking of laying them out afresh, and of making a green terrace at the top of a certain slope, like the one she praised so much at Bradenshope, and from whence there would be a view of the estuary sands and waters. Then he took her to the Old Tower, helping her up the worn, winding stairs, and showing her the secret passage which had once led out upon the Heath, and which was made, or rather finished, after the celebrated siege.

"And there below us is the Heath, the '*Black Heath*,' as it is often called," said Walter, as they sat together on the hoary battlements, about which moss, and lichen,

golden stonecrop, and pale lilac-flowered toad-flax grew in luxuriant profusion. "Just down below there, past that piece of rushy ground, the enemy were encamped; from the Pass, yonder, were first heard the roaring and bellowing of the fiendish cattle. Of course, the trench immediately beneath the walls was once the Moat, though how it was efficiently supplied with water we have been unable to discover, for the wells which now supply the household were not then in existence. Do you not admire the prospect?"

"I never saw one lovelier; and what a fragrant air! You must have some pretty strong sea-breezes here sometimes?"

"They are a good deal modified by the woods and by the rising ground behind the house, which shelters us from the winds of the open bay; but this fragrance which you remark is a compound of pure sea-air and mountain-air in all its freshness. You never get this subtle kind of odorous scent but in the hill-country and near the coast."

"Your bills of mortality are small, I should suppose?"

"Very small; but so is the population. If a census were taken of the whole district about us, as far as the eye can reach, I scarcely think it would amount to three hundred persons. Our people here die mostly of old age. If you are not too tired, you must come up here again just before we leave, to see the sunset lights; that reach of the Bay will be like molten gold, more or less fiery, as the sun sinks on the horizon, and afterwards, when it has quite set, a sea of opal. The mountains will be all one purple glow, as the crimson fades. We have the most magnificent sunsets in this wild land of ours, especially in the autumn."

"I should like to see this place in the autumn."

"I hope you will see it many times; I would drive you over whenever you wished it. You have only to express a desire."

"Thank you, Mr. Braden, you are very kind to me—you are all so kind; indeed, all the world has been good to me since I came north."

"That is an excellent hearing. Perhaps, if we make you quite happy, you will not want to go south again?"

"I shall never want to go south again permanently; I should like to live and to die in this fair, sweet North Country, where I have found happiness in its fullest, truest sense. Still, I fancy I should like to visit London occasionally if it were only for the contrast; and one *might* rust a little, I should say, living so utterly out of the great world's reach?"

"Of course one *might*. There are the newspapers, by means of which we somewhat keep up our pace; though, in many things, I always find myself behindhand when I go to London. Oh, no! I quite agree with you; it would never do to live here always, year in year out. Thirty years ago it might have answered; it would not answer in these go-ahead, energetic days of steam and electricity. I always go up to town in the spring, and again just before Christmas; and, when I marry, my father will let me have the house in Harley-street, on condition of its being always open to my sisters in the season, as long as they remain unmarried. And I do not think any of them will be old maids; Christina may marry comparatively late; but, sooner or later, some one will certainly claim her as a discovered jewel."

"She might not choose to be claimed."

"She will when the right claimant appears, and the man will be lucky who gets my sister Christina for a wife."

"Indeed, I think so."

Then, having pointed out all the landmarks, and named even the most distant and shadowy mountain-peaks, Walter led his companion down to *terra firma*, and took her into the old church, in which no service, save the funeral service, had been performed for many years. They did not linger there, for the place had painful memories for Walter. As they turned away, he said simply, "Poor Paul lies there with the others; his name and age must be added to the rest."

It was a small and very old church, and daylight showed through the roof in many places; some few banners of battle still hung above the dark-browed chancel; there were scarcely any pews.

"Why do you suffer this place to fall into such utter decay?" asked Hilda.

"I scarcely know. It is not the parish church, it is only a private chapel of our own; it has been a family burial place for many generations, and nothing more. But I think I will ask my father to have it new roofed; it has been patched up over and over again. The parish church is two miles away, at the waterside, and there is a comfortable Wesleyan chapel just outside the park, where everybody goes. What will you say if I tell you that I have *preached* in it more than once?"

"That it was very good of you; I should like to have heard your sermons."

Hilda was not so tired that she could not go up to the battlements of the Tower to see the sunset. It was quite late when they all went back to Bradenshawe. Hilda went to bed, thinking that she had never spent a happier day, and quietly wondering who was the lady to whom Walter was likely soon to be "engaged."

CHAPTER XXXV.

FAVOURABLE SYMPTOMS.

"True love's the gift which God has given
To man alone beneath the heaven.
It is the secret sympathy,
The silver link, the silken tie,
Which heart to heart, and mind to mind,
In body and in soul can bind."

AFTER that day at Arnheim, time seemed to pass more pleasantly than ever. There was a real picnic at Bradensghyll; another to a small lake, noted for its beauty, about five miles from Endlestone; and several other expeditions, while the glorious summer weather lasted—as last it did, far into August. "Such a summer as we have not had for years," said everybody, as week after week brought its

sunshine and heat, its flowers and fruit, and presently its ripening grain.

Then Philip Harwood went away to his own county, leaving the lady of his affections a little sad, but scarcely sorry to be able to devote herself entirely to her own family, and to have leisure to consider the important question of wedding clothes. Philip went, it must be confessed, with a good deal of reluctance; but of course he had his own arrangements to make at Harwood Grange, which, though in very good order after his long minority, was not quite ready to receive a bride. And profiting by the vexatious experiences of a friend of his, and knowing well the incertitude and general tardiness of legal transactions, he resolved to have the settlements prepared without delay. "For I am not going to be served like poor Tom Fulton, whose marriage was put off for months," he said to Walter, the night before he quitted Bradenshope; "just as everything was finally fixed, the bride-cake ordered, and the bouquets bespoken, the lawyers suddenly discovered some flaw in certain title-deeds which would render null and void the entire settlement they had prepared, and certificates of baptism, of marriage, and of burial had to be sought for right and left, up hill and down dale, for the blunder was an elderly one, and there was used, somehow or other, red tape enough to make a line from here to London, and those unlucky young people were kept, I don't know how long, shivering on the brink of matrimony. I wonder it didn't all go off."

"A good hint for me!" replied Walter. "I won't let the grass grow under my feet when my time comes. I'll have the settlements put in hand the day after I am engaged."

"And that day is not far off, I trust. It doesn't need a sixth sense, old boy, to find out who has possession of your heart! Your brother-in-law elect heartily approves; she is the best and sweetest girl in the world, to my mind —*her Emily*, you know."

"What are my chances of success, think you?"

"Oh, you'll have her, you'll have her, sure as fate, if God preserves your joint lives a little longer. You'll have to accustom her to the idea, that's all; I am certain she

likes you. If she fights shy, neglect her for awhile ; there's nothing like a little *wholesome neglect* for fetching a woman round, when she can't make up her mind. You see girls take a great deal sometimes till they come to taking it as their due, and as from an inexhaustible fountain. In fact, like the haughty Florentine dame, they

" 'Give a wave, but take a sea.'

Now, when the supply begins to fail, *they* begin to consider, and all at once they find out that life is not half so pleasant without the accustomed worship, and that the future looks sadly uninviting—a blank, indeed, as that with which they have so long dallied fades gradually away, becoming more and more intangible and threatening entirely to disappear. I don't care for a girl who is like a ripe cherry, ready for your lips ; and I hate one, who, to use a vulgar phrase, 'sets her cap' at you, and all but says, 'I wish you would propose !' But, on the other hand, I don't approve of a girl who thinks she holds her lover so fast, that she can afford to treat him to cold indifference, and keep him 'on and off' like the good-for-nothing jade in Bon Gaultier's ballad ! "

" Upon my word, Philip, I think you ought to publish a volume of advice to bachelors. Yes ! yes ! your 'wholesome neglect' may be an excellent recipe ; but it's not easy to administer. And it is quite possible that you may, after all, only punish yourself. I think I'll go my own way, thanking you all the same, old fellow, for your good wishes and your sagacious counsel."

" Of course, you'll go your own way ! every man does, and, on the whole, it is quite as well that he should ; but if Miss Capel takes all your friendly attentions and makes no sign, but behaves herself like a sworn vestal virgin, take a journey—don't write—don't send her the ghost of a message ; and see if she won't miss her humble servant, Walter Braden, and wish that he were back again ! "

" I hope I shall not be driven to such extremities."

" I hope not. But if the case gets desperate, just try the *wholesome neglect*."

Neglect, however, was what Walter was by no means inclined to. On the contrary, he redoubled his attentions, but with so much delicacy, so much discretion, that it did

not strike Hilda how entirely lover-like they had become. He haunted the library and the morning-room perpetually, where Hilda was generally to be found when indoors; he brought her books, he gave her lessons in sketching from nature, he kept her supplied with the loveliest bouquets, and he was her attendant and faithful knight in every expedition, and even in the garden rambles.

As the days grew shorter, Bradenshope grew lovelier. Clear skies, purple mountains, rosy sunsets, amber and ruby lights formed the setting of rock and wood and waterfall and glen. The flowers were more gorgeous than ever; many-coloured asters, tall hollyhocks of every hue and shade; nasturtiums burning in the red western glow like fire; great bushes of crimson fuchsias; intensely blue lobelias, gay geraniums, odorous heliotrope, golden and rosy lilies of Japan; and, to crown all, innumerable late roses—vied with a hundred other fair and fragrant things in making a floral paradise of the lovely gardens of Bradenshope. The fruit, too, hung ripe and heavy on the boughs—purple and amber plums, mellow apples, russet pears, and blushing peaches on their southern wall. The woodlands were beautiful with their slowly-changing foliage, their brightly gleaming wreaths of gem-like briony, their clumps of drooping birch with golden tresses and graceful silver stems, not to speak of the deep-hued and brilliant berries of mountain ash, wayfarer's tree, woodbine, and wild guelder-rose, with, of course, hips and haws in every direction.

"I never, *never* dreamed of such beauty! such an earthly paradise!" sighed Hilda, as she returned one evening from Christina's school across the Pleasaunce; "The Grey House is beautiful, too—that is, in its way—but not like Bradenshope. When I think of leaving it, as soon I must, I wish I had never entered it. How can these girls be so willing to marry, and go away from such a home, from such tender parents? And yet I suppose it is the natural law; it is God's will that families should thus break up, and disperse, and become new centres:—

"As is meet and fit
A link among the days, to knit
The generations each with each."

Well, I will make the best of the sunshine while it lasts, and be thankful for the blessed peace and serene happiness which has been mine ever since my illness in the winter—a happiness, too, that has steadily *grown*; that has expanded like a bud or blossom; a peace that has deepened and become more assured, more settled, as time passed on. Yea! let me take the sweetness and the brightness as they come, with a greatful heart, praising the Lord for all His mercies and loving-kindnesses. Ah! I think that is such an expressive phrase—‘*loving-kindnesses!*’ A stranger may be kind enough; but *loving-kindness* can only come from one who is near and dear to us, and to whom we are near and dear. It is the individual tenderness for which in our inmost hearts all of us yearn. And this it is which the dear God gives us; He does not merely love the race; but He loves each child as one of His own family. ‘*Like as a father!*’ I never knew what that meant till I knew my uncle and Sir Paul. Oh, what a sweet, sweet word is ‘*father*’—father and mother—for both are one. And if the earthly relation is so precious, what must the Divine be? Immeasurably more precious, only we cannot yet conceive it.”

Late in the autumn Theodore Arnison left his school at York to finish his education with Parisian tutors, under the superintendence of the Michauds; and when he started on his journey, Louis accompanied him, with the intention of spending a month with his own kindred, and making some experiments in the French works, and in a French atmosphere. So now the Blue House was open to Hilda once more, and she felt it her duty to spend what time she could with her aunt and cousins, who had first taught her the true blessedness of an English *home*, as distinguished from a mere abiding-place, wherein to eat, and sleep, and carry on the common functions of existence, including the housing of one’s properties.

She put the case to Lady Braden, hoping she would not be displeased. “I am so afraid you should think I am making a convenience of you!” she said, almost faltering; she felt that it would be wormwood and gall to her to be misunderstood by the Bradens. “And yet,” she added, “I do think I ought! Is it not my duty?”

"It is your duty, my love," returned Lady Braden. "I should have loved you less, respected you less, had you shown any symptom of neglecting your own relations—those who have shown you so much true affection, and whose home would have been yours naturally all this while but for certain circumstances. At the same time, my dear, we entirely appreciate your love for us. I shall feel your absence as if you were a daughter of my own."

"And I shall feel the separation keenly; and yet the time cannot be far distant when I must once more make my home at the Grey House, and take up my duties there; when I can only be an occasional visitor either at the Blue House or at Bradenshope."

"I do not think, my dear, we shall ever be content quite to resign our claim to you. I hope Bradenshope will be always one of your homes. I am sure it will be your own fault if it is not. At present I think you ought to go to your Aunt Rose; she will not wish you to remain after M. Louis returns. You are sure you do not regret your decided rejection of that gentleman?"

"Quite sure. Louis Michaud could never have been more to me than a friend. I liked him as I came to know him. At first I did not; but the liking would never have grown to loving. If he had at all persecuted me with his addresses, I am afraid it would have turned into *disliking*."

"I think from what Rose said he was perfectly aware that his suit was hopeless."

"I wished him to understand as much. I would not for the world have given him the least bit of encouragement. That was why I was so glad to get away, and keep away. I dreaded lest he should construe the simple friendliness of everyday intercourse into something more."

"It was quite right that you should avoid such a contingency. I am glad, for several reasons, that you refused poor Louis. I do not think he and you would quite have suited, and I also think—that is, I have an idea of my own, privately, you understand—that I know some one with whom he would more perfectly accord, and with whom he would be very happy. Besides, my dear, I

should like you to marry an Englishman; for I hope and believe that you *will* marry before very long."

"I don't know," said Hilda, colouring, and looking down. "I am afraid I shall never care enough for any one. It would be so wrong, so unsafe, to marry without the right sort of caring, that I have come to the conclusion that I had better remain as I am."

"Shall I hurt you, my dear, if I ask you to tell me whether you were very much attached to that young man, Lord Camelford's younger son?"

"I thought I was. I suppose I was what you would call 'very fond' of him; but my love, such as it was, had no roots of reverence and honour, and when I found how false he really was, it died out, painfully and slowly, perhaps, yet very surely. If he came back to me truly repenting, and changed in character, I might rejoice—I am certain I should. The time *might* come when we should be friends again; but he could never, no! never, again be to me what he once was. I could never dream of marrying him. I should be constrained to say to him—

"‘Thou hast lost the key of my heart’s door,
Lost it for ever, and for ever,
Ay—for evermore!’”

"And some things that are lost are never found again in this world," sighed Lady Braden. "Trust is one of them. Only, my child, do not measure all men by the standard of that unworthy young man."

"Indeed, I do not. How could I, knowing dear Sir Paul and Uncle Ralph—ay, and even Louis Michaud, for I believe one might have full faith in him."

Lady Braden was glad that she did not include Walter; her mention of him would have implied either coquetry or icy indifference. She could not help saying, "And Walter? Is he not to be classed with the true-hearted, trustworthy ones?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I thought it might seem forward if I mentioned his name. I am sure Mr. Braden is one of the best of men, and the woman who marries him will have a rarely happy life."

"You think so?"

"Indeed, I do. Don't you, Lady Braden?"

"I think my dear son Walter the only man in the world worthy to stand side by side with his own father. As a wife, no woman could ever have been happier than I, more blessed or richer in love and trust and perfect sympathy; and Walter's wife will be equally happy, equally blessed, and as rich in treasures of the heart as I am, and always have been. I know it as well as if I read the future. When love is built on goodness and truth and reverence, it is never ending." And here Lady Braden ceased, fearing lest she should say just one word too much.

Two days afterwards Hilda went to the Blue House, with the understanding that she was to return to Bradens-hope as soon as expedient; and with her aunt and cousins she spent a very happy month. Flossie was herself again, and Irene was sweet and peaceful as ever. Only Hilda was grieved to see that she never seemed quite well or strong, and when the cold weather came she drooped still more and more.

"I do think," she said, in answer to Hilda's anxious inquiries, "I must have over-tired myself in the summer, at the time of Alice's wedding, for I have never felt the same since, though, now I come to think of it, I was rather ailing earlier in the spring. I never was so healthy as the others, you know—that is why I never stayed abroad. Mamma never would trust me from under her own wing."

"Dr. Clayton has seen you, of course?"

"Oh, yes, and he says almost what he said several years ago when I had grown beyond my strength. I am 'below par,' I want *tone*, and I am to take quinine and cod-liver oil, and live on the fat of the land, and take great care of myself through the winter. And I think he did say something about Mentone, or Cannes. But there really is nothing the matter; only I am always tired, and I have very little appetite. Don't trouble about me, dearie; I shall be all right in the spring—or else—"

"Or else what, Irene?"

"I shall be where there is no more weariness or pain. Whichever way it is, it will be all right. I have often thought I should not live to be old."

Hilda turned away to hide her tears. The sudden conviction flashed upon her that Irene was right. She was much changed since that bright day at Arnheim, now three months ago. Hilda had not seen her since, and she was startled to find her looking so shadowy and so frail, and yet with that sweet expression of peace upon her quiet, thoughtful face, which seemed almost a foretaste of the heavenly calm beyond the grave. But for this anxiety, Hilda would have enjoyed herself extremely. Flossie, though most kind to her sister, did not apprehend any serious results; and even Mrs. Arnison did not seem to realise that any danger was impending. She nursed and petted Irene to her heart's content; every little dainty was for her, and she was forbidden to exert herself beyond her strength; but still the mother's fears were not yet actually awakened. Only Cynthia—the wild Cynthia—appeared to recognise the sad truth, that Irene was slowly fading before their eyes. When the time came for Hilda to return to Bradenshope—and she did not leave till the morning of the day on which Louis was expected home—she said to her aunt, "I can't bear to leave Irene; she is so very unwell."

"I wish you could stay, my dear," replied Mrs. Arnison, "for you are a great comfort to your cousin. But I hope you will soon hear she is better. I should be the more concerned if she had not been like this once before. When she was about fifteen, all our friends said she was going into a decline; but good nursing and tonics brought her round. When she was nearly eleven, too, I remember, we got frightened about her. She fell away so much, and had to give up all her studies for awhile. She has always been our delicate one. I did hope she had quite outgrown these attacks of weakness and low fever."

"I shall be very uneasy till I know that she is really and permanently better."

"My dear, your tone makes me uneasy—that is, much more uneasy than I have been. Dr. Clayton has said nothing to alarm any of us."

"He did mention Mentone, I think?"

"He did, but only casually. If I thought the change would be beneficial—set her up again—she should go

before the winter sets in. I did speak to her of Torquay, but she was distressed at the thought of leaving home. I shall watch her very closely, Hilda. Don't be troubled, my child ; please God, our dear Irene will soon be herself again, though strong and hearty like her sisters I fear she will never be. She has been, as I said, delicate from her birth. We have had so little illness in our house, and death not at all, thank God. We have never lost a child, and your uncle has had excellent health ever since we married. I am afraid, Hilda, I don't know what chastening is ; I had a good deal of trouble as a girl at home. I had lost my mother, and my father never tried to fill her place, and my brother George—your father—took such a dislike to my husband, simply because he was a business man. But my path has been very smooth, and the lines have fallen to me in pleasant places, from the day I became Ralph's wife. The greatest sorrow I have ever known, as Rose Arnison, was my dear friend, Lady Braden's, bitter affliction. Personal griefs I have had none, though I think I grieved for poor Paul *almost* as if he had been mine own. But, oh ! thank God, he was not. If my darling Irene were to be taken, I should know that she was safe landed on the heavenly shore—‘not lost, but gone before.’ ”

Hilda had been so absorbed in her anxiety for her cousin that she had thought little, comparatively, of Bradenshawe. Now that she was going back, she felt her interest in her friends there revive, and she wondered—not for the first time—why Walter had never called at the Blue House during the month—nearly five weeks in all—that she had spent there ; and he generally rode into Endlestone twice or thrice a week. She had missed him—there was no doubt of it ; and she had looked forward with unmistakable pleasure to being once more in his society. “Though, of course,” she said to herself, “it is Christina whom I chiefly miss ; it is she to whom I am so happy to return. Yes, and I want my dear Lady Braden ; it is very foolish, but I can't help wishing I had been born her daughter.”

When Hilda reached Bradenshawe, she was warmly welcomed by all but Walter, and he was nowhere to be

seen. Hilda had quite expected him to drive over to the Blue House for her. However, Christina had come to fetch her in the pony-chaise, and "that was better still," she assured herself more than once during the brief journey.

"He will be in presently," she thought; "perhaps no one told him I was returning to-day. Perhaps he is at Arnheim; but he will be sure to be back to dinner, it is dark now so early." She could not, somehow, ask the simple question she would have asked freely enough three or four months before; she could not say to any of the girls, "Where is your brother?"

When dinner-time came, Mr. Braden was still absent, and Hilda's quick glance at once perceived that no plate was laid for him. And still she made no sign; wherefore Sir Paul inwardly chuckled, and afterwards said to his wife, "I take it as a most favourable symptom that she made no inquiry; she would have asked where *I* was as soon as ever she missed me! Her silence proves that she does *not* think of our boy as of an ordinary acquaintance; it will be all right, you'll see, presently."

Later in the evening, he came and sat down by Hilda, and quietly remarked, "Why, I do believe you have not missed poor Walter, and he was ever so dull and mopish for days after you left us."

"Of course, I perceived he was not at the dinner-table. Where is he?"

"I have a great mind to punish your unfeminine want of curiosity by not telling you."

"Very well, Sir Paul, I can ask Christina."

"You puss!"

"But it is not like you to be so vindictive, punishing a fault which, at the most, is merely negative—especially as I did miss Mr. Braden."

"I suppose I must relent. Well, Walter is in London, and he will not be back till just before Christmas, and then Mary and her husband will accompany him. He would have gone earlier, only he hurt his foot at Arnheim, just after you went to Endlestone—a sort of sprain it was, not at all severe; but it made him rather lame, and he could not mount his horse. There was business to be

transacted in town, and he went both on my account and on his own. I did not want to go myself; I could not leave the mother; I have not left her since—since our heavy loss."

"He is visiting Mrs. Crosbie, I suppose?"

"He went there at first, but he is with the Keppels now. John Keppel, one of Walter's greatest friends, an old schoolfellow and college-chum, has just come back from China. It was partly to see him that Walter went so much sooner than he had intended."

"So, then," meditated Hilda, when she was alone that night, "he could not mount 'Prince,' and that was why he did not call at the Blue House. Still, I wonder that neither Christina nor Agnes mentioned the accident when they wrote. Though I am sure I don't know why they should. What is Walter Braden to me? What is he? He is my friend—a friend, too, that I could not well afford to lose. He understands me so well, and in many ways we seem so completely in harmony. Yes, it is the truth, I shall miss him dreadfully, and, perhaps, by the time he returns, I shall be at the Grey House again. Bradenshope is not quite the same without him."

Next morning brought Miss Capel a letter from her friend Mary Sandys—a long one, such as young ladies love to write and to receive from their intimates. There was a good deal of news in it that did not greatly interest Hilda, but suddenly she came upon a passage which at once aroused her: "I have met your friend, Mr. Braden, of Bradenshope, and I like him immensely. He is with the Keppels, as I dare say you know. John Keppel is back from China, or Japan, or somewhere, and people are making a grand lion of him, and getting him to their evening parties. 'People' say that Mr. Braden and Ada Keppel are engaged. Is it true? Of course you know. I should have thought she was quite too dull and languid to please him; and she has straw-coloured hair, too. I never could take to a woman with hair of that colour. But men often admire their opposites, don't they? Ah! and very often they make sad blunders in this way. It may be only a report, but I have seen them together several times, and Ada seems mightily content."

It was a good while before Hilda finished her friend's letter. "Now I understand," she said, slowly. "This is his important business in town, and Miss Ada Keppel is the lady to whom his mother thought he would be soon engaged. I hope she is really good and true, for *his* sake. He would never be happy with a wife who did not love him for himself alone. Yes, I do hope, with all my heart, he will be *very* happy in his marriage."

But in her heart, I am afraid Hilda did not think affectionately of Ada Keppel, whom she had never seen. She had quite a sisterly feeling for Philip Harwood, because he was going to marry dear Emily. She certainly did not feel drawn towards Miss Keppel because she was to marry dear Walter, and yet the cases were identical. That evening Lady Braden said to her daughter Christina, "What ails Hilda? she is dull and quiet. I am afraid she is hankering after the Blue House."

"She complained of weary headache before dinner, mamma," replied Miss Braden.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HILDA CONFESSES TO HERSELF.

"Face to face in my chamber, my silent chamber, I saw her—
God, and she, and I only; there I sat down to draw her
Soul through the clefts of confession: 'Speak, I am holding thee
fast,
As the angel of resurrection shall do it at the last.' "

It was almost Christmas, and Mr. Braden and his sister, Mrs. Crosbie, were expected very shortly. Hilda had become most uneasy at hearing nothing from Mrs. Dorothy, who had proposed being at home again about this time. She was increasingly anxious, too, on Irene's account; altogether, the brightness which had so filled her

spirit during the summer and autumn was considerably overshadowed.

"No news from America," she said rather plaintively one morning when the letters as usual were distributed. "I wish Aunt Dorothy would write; this inexplicable silence is so unlike her; when I was last at the Grey House, her factotum Barnes was in what his wife called 'a regular quandary,' for want of orders."

"'No news is good news,' you know," observed Emily. "Depend upon it, Mrs. Dorothy is 'doing' America—that is to say, the States—in style, while she has the opportunity; she may be tolerably certain that it will never recur."

"She is somewhere in Canada, I believe. Her last letter was from a place called Ottawa, and she had found her friend." Hilda by this time knew something of the quest on which her aunt had gone, and she sympathised mightily with the sentiment which, at her age, could take her across the sea and into another hemisphere.

"Ottawa!" exclaimed Agnes; "that sounds like 'The Spy,' and 'The Last of the Mohicans.' Fancy being at such a distance from home; our sojourn at Catania was nothing to it. What makes you look so pleased, Emily? Your letter has given you a most becoming colour."

"Philip is coming," she replied, blushing with shyness and delight; "he will be here to-morrow, and he can stay till after my birthday, and that is more than three weeks to come."

"And some one else is coming, the day after to-morrow!" said Sir Paul, holding up a letter as he spoke. "Walter, and Mary and Crosbie, of course, accompany him, and he has asked John Keppel and Ada to spend Christmas with us, and they accept; we shall have a regular houseful. Christina, you must talk seriously to Mrs. Maxwell. Walter threatens to accommodate his friends at Arnheim, in case we find ourselves overcrowded; but Bradenshawe is wide enough, I trust, to shelter the Keppels, and Philip Harwood, and a good round dozen more."

"Of course it is, papa; we might entertain the county with a little contrivance. Arnheim is not to be thought

of ; it is all sixes and sevens with the improvements, and only imagine Mrs. Bluff's discomfiture ! Besides, one of us would have to go and play propriety, on behalf of Ada."

Hilda rose and left the room ; fervently, she wished herself back at the Grey House. She was sure she must be *de trop* with so many guests arriving, and then—she did not know why—but she felt a strange disinclination to meet the yellow-haired Miss Ada Keppel. An hour afterwards, going into Lady Braden's boudoir, she found Christina and her mother holding a cabinet council ; Hilda would have retreated, but that both of them called her back : "Do stay, and help us," said Christina, "we are settling about the rooms ; there are plenty of them, as you are aware, but we do not want to throw open the north wing in winter time, nor yet the cedar corridor. Should you very much mind taking me in as your room-mate for the few days the Keppels will remain ? Ada could have my room, and John must be content with the bachelor's chamber ; that arrangement would keep us all in this part of the house."

"I wanted to tell you," said Hilda, with a little hesitancy, "that I feel quite ashamed of staying on so very long ! Aunt Dorothy said three months or four would be the limit of her absence, and it is full five since she went away, and left me under your kind care. I feel sure she never intended to inflict me upon you for so long a period, and all things considered, I begin to think it would only be right for me to go to the Grey House, and look after things a little."

"Nonsense, my dear," replied Lady Braden, looking, as she felt, a little surprised. "The servants at the Grey House do not want supervision. They were to apply to Mr. and Mrs. Arnison if they found themselves in any difficulty ; nor can I permit you to be there alone, except it be for a few hours if requisite. Your aunt left you in my charge, and under my wing you must remain till Mrs. Dorothy in person claims you. I hope, my dear, you are not tired of us ? "

"Tired of you ! Dear Lady Braden, surely you do not suppose I am so miserably ungrateful ; you have made me only too happy, too much at home ; but——"

"But you will stay here as an extra daughter, and be a good girl, and make no excuses of any sort. I cannot spare you yet, nor can Christina; besides, you will very much enjoy Mr. Keppel's society; he is a most superior man, as well as a great traveller. Now, my dear, will you consent to share your room with Christina for a week or so?"

"Of course I will, and with the utmost pleasure. Christina and I have often wished there was a door between our rooms; have we not, Christina?"

"That we have! It will be delightful to enjoy our nightly talk without having to go out into the corridor just as the clock strikes twelve, and the wind begins shrieking like a dozen Banshees."

"At twelve o'clock you ought to be enjoying your beauty-sleep, you naughty girls. No wonder Hilda has looked so pale since she came back from Endlestone. My dear, I hope you are not really fretting at Mrs. Dorothy's silence?"

"No, I am not fretting, I think, but I am anxious; and then the weather has been so tempestuous of late."

"Nevertheless, no steamer has been lost, nor even delayed; all the mails have come safely to hand. If there had been any missing vessel, the papers would have told us. I dare say we shall hear soon."

And next day the long-expected letter actually arrived, and it was addressed to Lady Braden.

Mrs. Dorothy was quite well, never better; she was delighted with Canada, and did not find it nearly so cold as she had anticipated; but her return was indefinitely postponed.

"I had little difficulty in finding my dear old friend," she wrote; "but I have found him, only to lose him again. He is very ill and feeble, and a voyage for him is quite out of the question; my presence is an indescribable comfort to him, and he has entreated me not to leave him. Before he asked me, I had quite made up my mind to stay with him to the last; it needed no medical opinion to tell me that it was not very far off, for death was on the beloved face that I had not looked upon for so many weary years. We have had one long sad talk over our

past, and we do not intend ever to renew the conversation ; all is explained, and we completely understand each other. We wonder now how we could ever have doubted ; how we could ever have believed the utter falsehoods that were so cruelly palmed upon us. Tell our young folks, Letty, never to break a plighted troth—never to distrust those they love dearly upon the evidence of any third person. From the loved one's own lips let the sentence of condemnation come ; let there be a face-to-face explanation before any bond is broken. If only we had met *once*, that net of treachery that put us asunder would at once have been torn to shreds and dissipated like any other cobweb, and we should have spent our lives together. It was, however, as God willed, and regret now is unavailing, and resentment useless.

"I have promised Harry, then, to stay with him, and be with him at the last. He is not so poor as I imagined ; but he is quite alone in the world, save for the boy William, his young grandson. A dear, good lad is Willie, and a thorough gentleman ; but poor Harry needs a woman's care and tenderness, and mine is certainly his due. For the few weeks—it may be only days—that I am at his side I shall watch and nurse him as if we had been married long ago. For just a little while I shall count him as my husband, and I shall be his wife. He is so very feeble, and the faint spark of waning life may at any moment be extinguished ; still he is very happy, and waiting calmly for the blessed change.

"Thank God, he has been a Christian these many years —no ordinary Christian, either. He has been a burning and a shining light in this solitary place, doing unacknowledged missionary work, and seeing the fruit of his labours. His lamp is ready trimmed, and he listens for the Bridegroom's call. Safe on the Rock of Ages, he has nothing to dread in death ; so we take sweet counsel together, and speak of the mercies and loving-kindnesses of our faithful God, and of the strength that has been vouchsafed upon the way, and thank the good Lord who has given us to each other for these parting hours. And we know that we part but for a very little while, and 'He who in God lives, lives for evermore.'

"My sole anxiety now is about Hilda. I fear I trespass greatly on your kindness. I had no idea that I was leaving her for anything like the period which must elapse before I return to Endlestone, or I should certainly have made other arrangements. I suppose she cannot comfortably stay at the Blue House, and I scarcely know what to propose for her. My plan, however, is that she should return to the Grey House, and await me there with her friend, Mary Sandys, whom I know she wished to invite, as companion; and one of the Arnison girls could, perhaps, be spared to them occasionally. I shall write to Rose, as soon as I have time—by next mail, if possible. I feel as if I had undertaken grave responsibilities, and then shifted them on to your shoulders. Yet not for fifty Hildas would I leave Harry till he sleeps in death. I can only throw myself on your generosity, and beg you and Rose to make such arrangements as may seem prudent, and, above all, such as are most convenient to yourselves."

Lady Braden called Hilda to her, and gave her her aunt's letter to read. She was profoundly touched.

"Poor Aunt Dorothy!" she said, with the tears running down her cheeks; "and I thought she was cold and rather heartless! What a life of patient endurance hers has been! And how deep must have been that love that has been so faithful all these years! And how sweet and solemn must be this short reunion in the very valley of the shadow of death! I inexpressibly honour Aunt Dorothy, Lady Braden."

"And so do I, my dear. There is something supremely holy in fidelity such as hers. Ah, Hilda, my child! there is nothing in this world so pure, so sacred, so beautiful as this human love of ours, which God Himself has implanted in our bosoms. It is a flower for which to render thanks, even though in plucking it the thorns pierce us to the heart. But the thorns are only for earth, and the flower that fades here blooms anew in Paradise. And now, my child, make up your mind to stay quietly with us till your lawful guardian returns. I shall write to your aunt, and tell her that you are safe with us and well, and I hope happy."

"Dear Lady Braden, how good, how very good, you are to me. How shall I ever repay you?"

"Perhaps I may tell you some day how you may repay me—with interest, if you think you owe me anything. So, now, say not another word about the Grey House, or the Blue House, or any house but this as your home, till Aunt Dorothy herself comes to claim her adopted daughter."

This conversation was a great relief to Hilda, but still she wished to absent herself during the Keppels' visit. That, however, was now quite out of the question, for she could not even suggest such a thing without apparent rudeness and ingratitude. She made up her mind accordingly to stay, and make no sign, whatever should transpire. "And, really," she said to herself, when she was alone that night, "I am behaving most *preposterously!* Let me take myself to task; let me put myself into my own confessional! What is the meaning of my shrinking from this Miss Keppel?—for it is she and not her brother whom I wish to shun. I suppose the truth is, and it is a most unflattering truth, that I am—shall I say it?—yes, I will! I *will* look my mind's ugliness in the face; I am *jealous!* I should have liked to keep Walter Braden entirely to myself; I did so enjoy his friendship; I felt so much content in his society. Was that all? Did I wish that he might be something more than a *friend* to me? I am afraid I did, and I am bitterly ashamed of myself. I began by deprecating his arrival, lest, perchance, he should fall in love with me, miserable, vain simpleton that I was! And I have ended by—I had better say it out, and have done with it—I have ended by falling in love with him, or something very near to it. Oh, Hilda Capel, where is your proper pride, your womanly self-respect?

"Now, what shall I do? Let me be common-sensical whatever I am, and true to myself as an Englishwoman and a Christian should be. I cannot at present get away, that is clear. I must remain here, and witness the courtship of Walter and the yellow-haired girl. But I will not be foolish and mawkish. If I have given my heart unsought, I must get it back again; and what right had I

to think for a moment of Mr. Braden in the light I did ? As if I were a fitting bride for the heir of Bradenshope ! It would be a nice way of repaying all the kindness I have received from dear Lady Braden and Sir Paul to entangle their son in a marriage which would naturally be displeasing to them. For Walter's wife should be a woman of stainless name and descent, and he ought to have her first love. She ought to be a personage of importance, and qualified in every way to hold her own in the county—and everywhere. Of course, I am not worthy of so much honour and happiness, and yet—if he *had* cared for me, I think I could have made him happy !

" Foolish, foolish dreams ! And yet—even now, with Ada Keppel and her yellow curls coming to stare me in the face, I am not sure that I have so very much to be ashamed of. As things are it is impossible ; but I did think he *wanted* me to care for him, and—and—strange as it seems, I could have fancied that both Sir Paul and Lady Braden connived at throwing us together. I do think they have been a little imprudent, if they were persuaded that such a match was quite out of the question. I don't know, though. Lady Braden was aware of this attachment—she spoke of it that day at Arnheim, I remember; so her son was supposed to be invulnerable, and I—I had distinctly stated that I never intended to marry —never—no, never would trust my happiness again to any man on earth ! That was how it was, I suppose. I was a kind of nun at large, and he was on the verge of this engagement, and safe from all other impressions. And he liked me in a free, brotherly sort of way, as his sister's friend—just as I like Philip Harwood, and as I am pretty sure he likes me, with a sincere, pleasant, fraternal affection, that would see me wed happily, and heartily rejoice. Though once or twice there were words and looks !—and that day at Arnheim—that beautiful, never-to-be-forgotten day !—he devoted himself entirely to me, and we were left, as if purposely, to each other. If he had asked me that day out and out to marry him, should I have said yes ? I am not quite certain, but I think I should ! At any rate, I am clear that I should not have been vexed, nor even much surprised, and I really do believe my

answer would *not* have been in the negative ; and I must think he went a little too far then, and afterwards, for an engaged man, for such a one ought to regard himself in honour as virtually a married person. I don't like to blame him, but I cannot help feeling that Miss Keppel, if she knew some things, would have much ground for displeasure against him. I should not like my lover, soon to be my husband, to behave so—well, I will say—so attentively to another girl ! But she never will know it, and I will try to forget it myself. I mean to be very kind to her, and make her visit as pleasant as I can, and I do hope they will be very, *very* happy."

Next day Philip Harwood put in an appearance, delighted to be once more at Bradenshope, and under the same roof as his beloved one. He kissed the girls all round,—Hilda included, begging her pardon as he did so, and adding a little slyly, " You know you are one of them, and when I bought my little Christmas gifts the other day, I included '*sister Hilda !*' "

" What does he mean ? " thought Hilda, as the elate young gentleman carried off his betrothed for a private communication ; " one would think he, too, had fallen into my mistake—and that it was I, not Ada Keppel, who was to be Emily's sister-in-law ! But he must know, though I suppose the affair is scarcely yet announced, as no one has spoken of it in my hearing, and it was no more than an *on dit* in town, Mary said. *Can it be only a report ?* What if there were nothing in it ? It is rather odd that Christina does not say a word about it, even when we are alone. Yet why did Walter invite her here ; was it simply for her brother's sake ? Ah yes ! it all tallies with what Lady Braden said to me that day at Arnheim Towers. Perhaps she said it that I might take the hint, which, after all, was lost upon me. Well ! by this time to-morrow I shall have seen Mr. Braden once more, and the girl who has been so fortunate as to win his love."

And to-morrow came, and the large family carriage was despatched to Ellingham to meet the 4:30 train ; a cart went likewise to fetch the luggage. It would be quite dark ere Walter and his friends arrived, and dinner was ordered for seven precisely.

The train, as frequently happens about Christmas-time, was very late, though it had started pretty punctually from town; nor were matters mended by a slight fall of snow the night before, which had caused the rails to be slippery. It was more than half-past six when the tired, chilled, hungry travellers at last arrived. Hilda had dressed herself very nicely in black grenadine, with carnation-coloured ribbons, and one soft rose-petalled camellia in her hair. She wore also the pretty pink topaz pendant, which was Philip Harwood's Christmas gift. Christina had a lovely turquoise and pearl ring, Agnes a pink coral necklace, and Emily herself a diamond bracelet of no small value.

All, save Hilda, rushed into the hall when the carriage wheels were heard—as heard they were on the frosty ground long before they approached the house; even Lady Braden hurried after her daughters; Sir Paul had been on the look-out for the last hour and a-half. Hilda slowly followed when there were unmistakable sounds of arrival; she did not wish to appear altered in manner, nor could she determine to be among the foremost; she compromised matters, therefore, by standing back in the doorway of the ante-room, and watching from a little distance the entrance of the long-expected party.

Mrs. Crosbie and her husband appeared first, and there was so much embracing and saluting that the others, just behind, were scarcely to be discerned. Another second or two, and Walter was in his mother's arms, and John Keppel and Ada were on the threshold. As Walter lifted his head from his mother's kiss, he looked round the wide hall, as if in search of some one, and not finding what he sought, he looked again, and then turned back, as if to present the Keppels. John brought Ada forward on his arm, and seemed to introduce her to Lady Braden, and Ada smiled good humouredly and looked just a little flushed when Lady Braden kissed her.

"She does not receive her with very much *empressement*," thought Hilda; "and Walter ought to have introduced her himself. I hope it is in no way a marriage of convenience." Then she looked critically at Ada, who stood in the full light of a cluster of suspended lamps.

She saw a rather plain-featured girl, with a very good and sweet expression of countenance. Her hair was *not* yellow, but light brown, and it fell from under her hat in the richest profusion. She had not much complexion, and she certainly had a dull and languid air; but then she was probably very tired, having been travelling since early morning. She was short, and rather inclined to *embonpoint*; she had a round face and a square chin. "Not at all the person I should have thought likely to attract Mr. Braden," was Hilda's ultimatum.

"Come, children, don't loiter here; come to the fire," said Sir Paul, leading the way, and as the party advanced Hilda heard her own name pronounced. Walter was saying, "Mother! is not Hilda here?" Then she came forward and tried to speak quite naturally, but she certainly failed; there was so much stiffness, and even haughtiness in her manner, that Mr. Braden looked involuntarily into her face, as if to ask why she was displeased. His face, which had been so radiant, clouded over, and he glanced at his mother wondering whether she could explain. The meeting to which he had for weeks been looking forward disappointed him; he was repelled he knew not why, and Hilda's coldness chilled him far more than the frost-wind blowing from the Fells. There was no time for another word, for the Crosbies came up to be introduced, and then there was a general movement towards the stairs, it being understood that the first dinner-bell would be rung in a few minutes.

It was rather a dull evening, in spite of Philip's hilarity, for everybody was tired, and Miss Keppel complained of headache. The party broke up unusually early, and it was not more than half-past ten when Hilda and Christina found themselves *en robe de chambre*, brushing their hair before their bedroom fire.

"What do you think of Ada?" asked Christina, breaking the silence, and looking uneasily at Hilda's grave countenance.

"Nothing at all at present," replied Hilda. "I saw and heard little of her. I dare say she is very nice, and I am sure she is amiable and sweet-tempered. Her

brother seems to be very fond of her, and that testifies in her favour."

"Her brother? John Keppel is her cousin, and will be her husband before long. It is a very old engagement."

"Is she engaged to Mr. Keppel?"

"Certainly she is. It is a patent fact. I thought you knew it."

"On the contrary. I fancied from something I heard that Mr. Braden was the happy man."

"My brother Walter! Oh, you foolish goose of a young woman! You, of all persons ought to have known better! And so you gave poor Walter the cold shoulder this evening? I tell you what, Hilda, I have a great mind not to give you a good-night kiss, nor even to speak to you, till after breakfast to-morrow morning; I did not think you could have behaved so badly."

But the next moment her arms were round Hilda, and she was kissing her fervently. Those tears that silently gathered on her long dark lashes were more precious to Christina than pearls or diamonds.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LADY OF ARNHEIM.

"Indeed I love thee: come,
Yield thyself up; my hopes and thine are one;
Accomplish thou my manhood and thyself,
Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me."

"And so I won my Genevieve,
My bright and beauteous bride."

ADA KEPPEL was not a very interesting young lady; her character resembled those common-place faces which we so often meet, and which seem to have been fashioned in a hurry by Dame Nature, and left by her without having

received the finishing touches. She was amiable, almost to a fault ; she had not sufficient self-esteem to render her comfortably reliant on her own resources ; she was as utterly without opinions as an educated woman moving in good society well could be ; her sentiments—if, indeed, she could be said to have any—took their tone from the pervading influences of the hour, and apart from these were altogether colourless. Nevertheless, Hilda took a great fancy to her, and earned the bashful girl's utmost gratitude by the notice she continually bestowed upon her when her betrothed was absent. Well might Mary Sandys have come to the conclusion that Miss Keppel was quite "too dull" for Mr. Braden.

Notwithstanding all the sad memories that haunted Bradenshope, that Christmas was a very happy one—especially to the young people. The lovers certainly enjoyed themselves, as Mrs. Crosbie observed to her father one sunshiny morning, very early in the New Year. "And it seems to me, papa," added the young matron, "that we have no less than *three* interesting couples in the house!"

"Three, my dear!" replied the wily baronet, knowing quite well what his daughter meant, but wishing to hear what she thought of Walter's impending engagement.

"Yes! three, papa! Surely you are not blind? Surely you know what is going on under your own eyes? If you do not, I think it is high time you began to look about you."

"*Three* brace of lovers!" he said musingly, as if to himself. Then rousing up a little: "The Keppels, of course, and Philip and Emily; do you count Hilda and Walter as your third couple, my dear?"

"Of course I do, papa! Why, the fact is patent to all beholders! Where are your dear old eyes?"

"In my head, Mary; and they see all that is to be seen, I assure you. And, what is more, I saw it all, as long ago as last summer; Walter—good lad that he is—kept no secrets from his father, and he and I and your mother settled it there and then, that he was to have Hilda, if she could be won."

"Won! He has all her heart. She is quiet and guarded, as a maiden should be; but I am positive that

she cares for Walter, just as Emily cares for Philip Harwood—and perhaps a little more, for her nature is deeper and tenderer than Emily's, who, on the other hand, is more sparkling and vivacious than Hilda. Nor have I been married long enough to forget my own experiences. And you are satisfied?"

"Perfectly. Hilda Capel is just the woman for Walter; she is his exact complement, and without a too close resemblance of character and tastes, they harmonise delightfully. It pleases me to think that when all my own girls are gone to homes of their own, Hilda will remain the daughter of our house, and future Lady of Bradens-hope."

"But why are they not openly engaged?"

"Because Walter has not yet formally proposed. You know Hilda's sad story? She had so fully determined never again to risk her peace of mind, or to place her happiness in any man's keeping, that we felt quite sure that all lovers would, for a certain period, be at a discount. I saw, your mother saw, Christina saw, that Hilda returned Walter's attachment much more fully than she herself suspected; but, at the same time, we were far from confident that she liked him enough to make her, as it were, forswear herself, and accept him as her future husband. Hilda is not a girl to marry for anything short of purest and deepest affection, founded on reverence and esteem; nothing; I am convinced, would persuade her to give her hand without her heart—her whole heart—to Prince Charming himself! So, all things considered, we thought it best—your mother and I—to counsel Walter to a certain discreet reticence, and not to run the risk of a hasty refusal. Also, Hilda being our guest for an indefinite period complicated matters a little; she is shut out already from the Blue House, on account of a rejected suitor, and Walter himself was most anxious that this should not recur at Bradenshope. Then we hoped that Mrs. Dorothy would return in time to be consulted, so time has passed on, and nothing is settled yet."

"It will be settled very soon, I fancy."

"The sooner the better, for, if it please God, I should like to see Walter's little ones about me before I die. Now

tell me, Mary, what is your own impression as regards Hilda?"

"I like her extremely, what I have seen of her; and she is really a most beautiful creature. And her beauty grows upon you as the highest and most refined style of beauty always does. Hers is a face of which one could never weary—the kind of face that will be lovely even in old age; none of your *mignon* prettiness, all pink and white and dimples, that fades before its owner is middle-aged. But what, more than all, impresses me is Christina's profound regard and admiration; if Chrissie, who has seen more than any one of Hilda's inner self, can without reservation or misgiving promote the match, all doubts—if I had any—are dissipated. I wish they would make it up while I am here; I should like to kiss my *sister* Hilda before I go back to town. You see, I can't say a word till they are actually engaged; one could not impertinently insinuate one's convictions; still less could one joke on such a subject, and with so dignified a person as Miss Capel."

"Certainly not! I cannot imagine the man or woman who would presume to take the slightest liberty with Hilda. Now, as to Philip and Emily?"

"They were born for one another! Philip will make an excellent country gentleman, and he would do well in Parliament. James and I always did like Philip, you know, and wished that he might be our brother-in-law. He will be the very perfection of a husband—to *Emily*; and she is the one woman in all the world for him."

"And the Keppels?"

"Well, their affairs, happily, are none of ours, otherwise I should be exercised in my mind as to the probable issues of that match; there is so much fire and action in John's character, and so much passivity in Ada's. He is naturally altogether affirmative, and takes the initiative, as it were, by instinct; she is quite as naturally negative, and will always follow as she is led, even in her own peculiar province. Whether he will not some day awake to a sad sense of emptiness and failure in his life, is a question that I should not like to entertain. A man of energy and spirit does not care to find always at his side a pale,

colourless reflection of himself, and he tires of a mere echo of his sentiments—which, after all, is nothing but an echo, that cannot help but parrot what it hears. My James would weary of Ada's smiles and meaningless assents before the honeymoon had waned, supposing he were in John Keppel's place. But, then, if John Keppel is content, so am I!"

"Of course; but I am thankful it is not our Walter's case."

"What do you think? There were some wiseacres in our set who really *did* assign Walter to Ada! He had a great deal to say to John when they first met, after their long separation, and people supposed that the attraction to Harley-street was *Ada*!"

"That was not surprising; the world at large is so fond of making matches. This one, however—Ada's and John's—was one of those, I believe, that 'came about,' as people say—a kind of match that *may* prove satisfactory, and that is all one can say about it."

"I never could understand those unsatisfactory engagements that are *drifted* into, as one may call the process. I have heard of girls going to be married who had never been downright proposed to. I have my private suspicions that John Keppel never asked his cousin to become his wife, but that somehow the engagement came to be implied, and so stands, and will stand. A woman can have very little pride who thus gives herself unasked; I could never really respect such a one. At the same time, the man must be to blame, for he must in some sort have flirted before his intentions could be so assumed."

"At any rate, a woman so acting has only herself to blame if, in after years, her husband gives her to understand that she was *not* his deliberate choice. Maidens cannot be too maidenly—at the same time remembering that starchiness and prudery are but perversions of modesty! I am happy to say that my daughters are not likely to wander to either extreme; and as for Hilda, no one could behave more beautifully, for now, I do think, Walter's defection would be to her a positive affliction."

"I hope it would. I long to tell him that 'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

"Do not. Leave the young people entirely to themselves ; no one has any right to meddle in such cases ; interference is almost sure to annoy and do mischief of some kind or other. It is the true-born Englishman's pride and privilege to do his wooing for himself, the Englishwoman's happiness to refuse or accept for herself. I beg you will not say a word to Walter ; I flatter myself the *dénouement* is near at hand."

And Sir Paul was not wrong in this supposition.

Two mornings after this conversation the weather was so bright and mild that all the young people assembled at Bradenshope felt themselves impelled to go somewhere or do something out of the ordinary way. The Crosbies went to Endlestone, intending to lunch at the Blue House ; Philip and Emily rambled away into the wildest portion of the park, being duly warned not to stray into the pastures of the wild cattle ; John Keppel had letters to write before he could go out, and Ada waited dutifully for him, hooking away the while at her interminable crochet-work. Walter came into the morning-room where his sisters and Hilda were generally to be found after breakfast. He had not yet forgotten Hilda's coldness on the evening of his return. "I am going to drive to Arnheim," he said ; "I want to see how the alterations outside and inside are progressing ; which of you girls will go with me ?"

Hilda of course was silent. "I really think I had better not drive," was Agnes' reply. "My cold is just giving way, and I should be sorry to renew it ; I had rather stay at home, and take a little walk with mamma on the terraces, presently. Papa went with James and Mary to Endlestone."

"Then, may I count upon you, Hilda, and you, Christina ? We may not have another such a day the whole winter. This extraordinary mildness generally foretells rain ; it will be wet to-morrow."

"It is just what I should like," said Christina. "It seems quite sinful to loiter indoors on such a splendid day. Shall we both go, Hilda ?"

"If you please ; I want to see Arnheim in its winter dress ; those great northern fells must look like the Alps,

with the sunshine sparkling on their snows." And Hilda began to wash her brushes, and put away her paints. She left the room first, and as Christina was following, Walter called her back. "Chrissie, my dear, if Mrs. Bluff should have anything private and confidential to impart, perhaps you will not mind listening to her? I want to speak to Hilda. I will do as much for you some day, my child."

"All right! I understand," replied Christina, with quite a glow of pleasure. "Nothing could be better."

"Yes, I have resolved to risk all, and know my fate; I cannot bear the suspense any longer. If she do not care for me now, she never will."

"You men are so impatient."

"Impatient! and I have waited all these months. Why, I was on the verge of proposing that day at Arnheim. I came back from town, determined to lose no more time, and she was as cold as charity! I felt as if I had taken a sudden cold shower-bath. She has thawed a little since, but she is not quite her old sunshiny self."

"So much the better for you! A good deal of that sunshine in which you basked came of pure unconsciousness. A little coldness and reserve are encouraging symptoms, if you did but know it. Besides, some one in London—Miss Sandys, I believe—Hilda's only correspondent in town, had written and told her that you were engaged to Ada Keppel."

"Of all absurd things to write! Ada—I can't imagine what John sees in her, though she is good enough, poor little soul—would certainly have lived and died a spinster for me, even if I had never seen Hilda Capel! And she believed it?"

"Quite, and something mamma once said confirmed her in the notion. I told her she ought to have known better."

"She ought, indeed! What did she say?"

"Ah! now you ask too much. I am not going to betray any of our little feminine confidences. You must find out for yourself what she said, Walter. No, not another word; Hilda will be dressed before I have settled what to wear. We must take plenty of wraps, for it will

be chilly coming home. These spring-like days in the depth of winter are always treacherous."

The drive to Arnheim, however, was delightful, and they reached the Towers a little after noon. Mrs. Bluff came out to meet them in great dismay. "Now, Mr. Walter, why didn't you let me know? There is no fire anywhere except in my room and in the kitchen, and I'm turning out my cupboards, and making a fair list of last year's preserves. And there's nothing for your luncheon but bread and butter and cheese, and ham and eggs, and a great game-pie I made myself, for fear anybody should come over from Bradenshope."

"A game-pie, Mrs. Bluff! What can be better! Could you not light a fire in the South Parlour, while we take a little walk in the gardens?"

"To be sure I could. And the game-pie isn't to be despised, though I say so that shouldn't—seeing it is my own handiwork, and my own recipe, to boot."

"I am sure it will be excellent; your pies are always savoury, Mrs. Bluff. Where is your good husband?"

"He is somewhere about the farm-buildings, sir; they began upon the sheds and outhouses last week, when the weather changed. But won't the ladies have just a snack before they take their stroll?"

"We have biscuits, and we are going to the dairy," replied Christina. "I suppose we shall find some milk there?"

"Plenty, Miss Braden. Your favourite Alderney has a calf three weeks old, and her milk is as good as some people's cream. I'll have the fire lighted directly, ma'am; the room doesn't want much airing, for it gets all the sunshine, and we are never damp at Arnheim; though I am afraid the large dining-room would strike too cold to be quite safe."

"We shall like the South Parlour much better," said Walter, who was growing a little tired of the discussion. "Come, Hilda, we are losing the best of this charming day."

"I am only waiting for Christina."

"We will not wait for her; I can see that Mrs. Bluff has a word or two for her ear. I have constituted

Chrissie mistress here till the real lady-paramount arrives."

"Indeed, Miss Braden, I do want to know about those table-cloths," assented Mrs. Bluff. "If I could speak to you, ma'am, for just five minutes?—I wouldn't keep you longer."

"I am at your service, Mrs. Bluff. Go on, Walter, and don't take Hilda too far."

Walter needed no second injunction. As Christina disappeared down the long passage leading to Mrs. Bluff's quarters, he offered his arm to Hilda, and led her across the great hall into the open air, where the sun shone and the birds piped and warbled, thinking—poor, deluded little creatures!—that summer had suddenly arrived. They went to the dairy and had their milk, and then they visited Mrs. Strawberry and her pretty little calf; after which, Walter proposed that they should walk on the broad terrace, under the walls of the old Tower, which looked towards the south, and was always sheltered and warm, even in wintry weather. They had no sooner reached the walk—high above which frowned the grey battlements of the ancient Keep—than Walter began: "Hilda, I have a serious charge to bring against you?"

"Have you? What have I done—or left undone?"

"It was reported to you that I had been poaching on John Keppel's preserves, and—you believed it!"

"I had not the least idea that they were Mr. Keppel's preserves. And I thought Mary Sandy would know; she is not given to gossip and newsmongering; and —"

"And, what?"

"Lady Braden said something when we were all here in the summer."

"What was it, Hilda?—tell me, dear!"

"She was talking about the refurnishing that would have to be attended to when—when you married; and she said that she had hopes now that you would very speedily be engaged."

"Yes, the dear old *mater* knew all about it; her hopes—I am thankful to say, my father's, too—went in the same direction. We were all agreed as to *who* the bride

should be ; the only hindrance was in the lady herself, who had promised and vowed that she never would be married ! ”

“Indeed ! ” said Hilda, faintly.

“And as she had, as I said, promised and vowed this thing, and as she undoubtedly meant it, I very reluctantly, but acting under the advice of my revered elders, decided not to speak the words that that day trembled on my lips : to wait, in short, my opportunity, in the hope that the dear girl would in the course of the autumn come to think differently, and learn in some small measure to appreciate the worth of a loving heart devoted entirely to herself. Tell me, Hilda, I beseech you, that I have *not* waited and hoped in vain ? I *cannot* wait longer ! I *must* know my fate to-day.”

“And is it I who hold your fate in my hands ? ”

“It is you—*you*, Hilda Capel, and no one else. Will you be my wife ? ”

“I will.”

“Thank you, darling. How happy you make me ! How happy the dear old people will be ! They are almost as anxious as I ; and my sisters, all of them, are waiting to open their arms to you as more than friends.”

“I cannot understand it. *I*, of all people, to win *your* love. I, who am nothing and nobody, a poor dependent on the bounty of a kind kinswoman ; and you, the heir of Bradenshope, and the master of Arnheim ! You, who might have sought your bride among the noblest and the fairest of the land ! ”

“I could have none nobler, none fairer, than the lady of my choice. Hilda, I believe I fell in love with you last April, when I found you and Irene in the Haunted Room. You, I think, were saying how you would, if you were Lady of Bradenshope, burn our Medicis cabinet, and—”

“You did hear my foolish speech, then ? ”

“I heard every word of it. And when I saw you I thought what a lovely Lady of Bradenshope you would make, if I could but persuade you to think so. And since that day I have cherished the idea. At first it was only an idea—a shadowy, pleasant idea ; it began to take

shape at Alice Arnison's wedding. And then, when I found you at Bradenshope, when I learned to know you better, I grew gradually to feel that you were the one woman in all the world for me, that I must win you, or be — very unhappy, and for ever solitary."

"Dear Walter, I did not guess you cared so much."

"Did you not, sweet? Well! we understand each other now, don't we? And if God please, we shall be very, *very* happy for many long years to come. And I have done what I wished, after all: I have asked you, and you have promised me, at Arnheim. We will never forget this day, my dearest."

No, they never could forget that sweet, calm day, with the ancient towers of Arnheim above them, and the fair broad lands of Arnheim about them and at their feet. There was the glittering estuary, its full-tide waves sparkling in the sunshine, and the stretch of golden sand beyond; there was the winding river lying like a scroll of silver on the low meadow land, the bare and solemn woods, the dark pines, the Black Heath, with its wild coverts of juniper and gorse, and its little reed-fringed tarn, so sullen under gloomy skies, but now like one pure lustrous sapphire sprinkled here and there with flashing diamonds! On the other side the estuary were the frowning granite cliffs, breaking at intervals into long wooded ravines, or sweeping round the mimic creeks and bays; while behind them rose the lower fells, and further back, chain after chain of towering mountains, peak, and crag, and untrodden slopes, and solitary upland plains, transfigured and glorified by the beautiful white snow, which covered all those lonely heights. To the south stretched many a mile of wavy fell and fir-crowned knoll, with here and there a glimpse of shining waters—beck or tarn, or rushing mountain stream. And close by, the battlemented old tower, the half-ruined feudal pile of other days, and the long grey line of more modern building with its castellated front and its hoary turrets—the home that was to be Hilda's and Walter's for many happy winters and many pleasant summer days. Over all, the soft blue vault of sky, resting as it seemed on the distant snow-crowned peaks, and fading into a faint,

golden-touched haze on the far horizon of the south. No ! Hilda and her lover would never forget that lovely day while life and reason lasted !

How long they lingered there under the shadow of the crumbling tower, they never knew ; and how much longer they would have loitered, I will not undertake to say, had not Christina appeared on a ledge of rock close by, fluttering her handkerchief, in token that they were waited forindoors.

" You very wicked people ! " was her salutation, as they met just at the entrance of the Pleasance. " Do you know—have you the least idea—what time it is ? I was almost starved for want of my luncheon, and the ham and eggs were spoilt, and the coffee cold, and I have made awful havoc with the pastry, which would have delighted the heart of Friar Tuck. I did not see why I should fast because my friends were shamefully unpunctual. But do come in at once, and make a hasty meal, or it will be dark before we get back to Bradenshope. What is the matter, Hilda ? Oh, Walter, what have you to tell me ? "

" Allow me to present to you the Lady of Arnheim, sister Christina ! I need not ask you to welcome her warmly, as my affianced wife." Upon which speech the two young women rushed into each other's arms, to the great edification of old Bluff, who was plodding towards them with a pitchfork in his hands. But they did not see him, though Walter did, and they " wept a little weep," as a relief to their excited feelings. And they might have cried longer than was expedient, had not Mr. Braden interfered, and marched Hilda away to the South Parlour, and unromantically exhorted her to make a good repast. Which, after a little delay, she did ; thus, as Christina said, commencing at once her rôle of wifely obedience. And, truth to tell, they both made a goodly impression on the savoury pie, and even feasted on lukewarm, half-congealed, fried ham and eggs !

" The coffee won't do at all," said Walter, as Christina poured out a cup. " No ! even your Alderney's rich cream will not tempt me ! I know where there is a bottle of wonderful *Chambertin* ; we will pledge each other in that. I kept it for some most glorious occasion.

There is more of it below ; we will take care of that for the wedding."

Already the shadows of evening were falling ; the lovely day was dying fast, and pale rosy flushes glowed upon the snowy heights, and crimson cloudlets, like royal banners, gathered in the clear, pale sky, and were reflected in the opal-tinted and amber sands, whence the tide had now receded. It was high time to begin the homeward journey, for there was no moon, and the twilight closes in full speedily in those mountain regions, when the days are at the shortest. Walter did not wish to celebrate his betrothal-day by a grand upsetting on the solitary moorland.

They reached Bradenshope safely ; and as Walter lifted Hilda from her seat he whispered, " Let us go straight to the mother ; she will be in her own sitting-room at this hour, and I should not wonder to find my father there with her, taking his cup of tea."



C H A P T E R X X X V I I I .

HILDA'S ULTIMATUM.

" We date
Our marriage from our meeting-day, and hold
These spousals of the soul inviolate,
As they are secret ; for no friends were bid
To grace our banquet, yet a guest Divine
Was there—who from that hour did consecrate
Life's water, turning it for us to wine.'

JANUARY 30.—It is just a year since I began to recover from that terrible illness which followed my accident on the ice. And what a year it has been ! A year of great peace and happiness—a year of countless blessings ! You know by this time, Mary, what a grand mistake you

made when you told me that Ada Keppel was Walter Braden's betrothed ! Ada is very good, but a trifle dull, and quite too passive, generally speaking ; how could you ever suppose that she and Walter would get on together ? I am not quite sure that she really suits John Keppel ; but that, you will say, is no affair of mine—as, indeed, it is not. However, as he talks of going to Mongolia soon after his marriage, and leaving his wife at home, it is, perhaps, quite as well that she should not be endowed with too much sensibility. I almost wonder that he marries at all, since his delight is in visiting the uttermost parts of the earth, and in roaming over regions whither he could not be accompanied by a lady. Ada seems well content to stay in England while her husband explores those mountains with an unpronounceable name, so I suppose it is all right ; but I am glad Walter does not want to rush off to Kamschatka, or to the Steppes of Tartary, or "anywhere, anywhere, out of the world"—of civilisation.

Ada and John are to be married directly after Easter, and somewhere about the same time Emily and Philip Harwood are to become man and wife. Walter proposed a double wedding, but that could not possibly be, as I soon proved to him. I must be married from my proper maiden home ; and that is the Grey House, and Aunt Dorothy has not yet specified any period for her return—for Mr. Rivers still lingers on, and she will not leave him till all is over. I have, as in duty bound, mentioned to her my engagement, which I trust will meet with her entire approval ; but I would not trouble her with anything like future arrangements ; it would be unfeeling to obtrude my happiness on her sorrowful spirit. So no time can possibly be fixed, only Walter says it must not be later than June—the month of roses. We shall see ! But, whenever it is, you will come, Mary, and be one of my bridesmaids, as you promised long ago.

I have been thinking a great deal to-day about poor Aunt Dorothy and her life-long trial. I told you once that she chilled and repelled me, that she was cold and dry, and though not actually unkind, severe and stern, and terribly exacting. Ah, how little I knew ! How

little I guessed the hard training to which she herself had been subjected. Still less could I imagine the depth of that love that survived long years of silence and separation—of apparent treachery and falsehood, that lived on when earthly hope was dead, when the grave, as she believed, covered all that remained of him who seemed so erring and so faithless. Ah, what a terrible grief it must have been ! She lost him so entirely ; she had not even the sad consolation of cherishing sweet memories of the past—it was all dark, bitter, and mysterious. Hers is indeed the love that is stronger than death, that waits patiently and meekly, enduring to the end.

No ; I could not possibly trouble her with my concerns, just now. And yet I can scarcely suppose she is really unhappy. It must be an intense joy to her—this brief reunion, even on the grave's brink, after the long years of painful severance. How cruelly was she wronged ! how shamefully defrauded of her woman's heritage of wedded happiness and sweet home treasures ! A widow—but never a wife. Poor, poor Aunt Dorothy ; though far less poor than she would have been had the mystery never been explained, had her friend died and made no sign, had they never met again.

I am still at Bradenshope, and must remain till Aunt Dorothy is once more at the Grey House. I can hardly believe that this grand old place is one day to be my home. We shall spend a good deal of our time here, I suppose. Lady Braden and Sir Paul both wish it ; but we shall take up our residence at Arnheim—a much older place than this, and not half so fine, but still more beautiful in its surroundings, as it seems to me, and dear to me as the ancient inheritance of the Bradens and the birthplace of my dear Walter.

We had one long and serious conversation about Horace Trelawny ; I can speak his name now without a pang—nay, with the most perfect indifference. Really, I do not think it would trouble me to meet him face to face ; he would be no more to me than the merest stranger, than the chance passer-by, whom, meeting for the first time, I do not expect to meet again. I say I should see him with indifference ; but now I come to think of it, I am not so

sure of that, for I believe my heart would overflow with gratitude for all that happened to cause our separation. A little longer, and I might have been that man's wife, and doomed to a career of wretchedness of which I cannot think without a shudder. Oh, Mary, God has been very merciful to me! What a blessing in disguise was that seeming misfortune, that loss of everything—or so I fancied—of all that was most dear. The dross and tinsel were swept clean away, and like a child I cried for my worthless toys, and mourned over my shattered idols, not knowing that God had great treasure in store for me, and that I was ere long to receive beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

I wonder now that I ever cared for Mr. Trelawny—care for him, in the best and highest sense, of course I did not; I could not, because it was not in me then to care deeply for anything or anybody—that is, counting depth of feeling as now I count it. I was given over to vanity and folly; I had no higher ambition than to fritter the hours away in idleness or dissipation, to shine in the gay, thoughtless circle, in which I—as thoughtless and gay as any—lived and moved and had my being, a mere butterfly of pleasure, a foolish child of fashion!

I am afraid a great many girls get engaged as I did, without any serious reflection; they take a partner for life as lightly as for the dance; they do not in the least recognise the sacredness of the tie which God Himself appointed. Marriage is to them a mere bargain, a sort of crisis to which all must come—a *duty*, in fact, to which girls in society are bound; a bargain, in which each one, of course, hopes to be the gainer. I was telling Walter all about that first engagement—for an engagement as far as Horace and I were concerned it certainly was, sanctioned by my aunt, though unratified by my poor father; how I came to think of him, how a something, made up of flattery and vanity and excitement and idleness, and which I profanely called *love*, sprang up in my mind, and how I listened, spell-bound and credulous, to the enchanter's voice. You remember that ball, Mary—that splendid ball, which appears to me now, as I try to recall

its memories, like a fairy pageant; a pageant, too, in which I bore, so people said, so brilliant a part. It was my triumph—my crowning triumph, I was told. It might have been, for victory sometimes precedes defeat, and the higher one has mounted the greater is the fall. But such a poor triumph! such a miserable victory!

It was at that ball, you know, that Horace proposed. I had expected the offer, and so had my Aunt Mowbray, and I received it with a thrill of gratified vanity, and, I must confess, with a good deal of levity. Horace himself pleased me; he was handsome, well-born, wealthy, as I supposed—not that I cared for that; I must do myself the justice to say that I did not accept him for what he had, nor for the prospective coronet he was to wear, though doubtless his imaginary wealth and rank cast their *glamourie* over my girlish fancy. He fairly dazzled me, however; he was just the sort of man to charm a shallow, worldly-minded *belle* of the ball-room in her first season, for he was a great favourite with women, and many, I knew, had vied with each other in claiming his attention; he was gallant, witty, even epigrammatic in his conversation, and he could play the part of a devoted lover to perfection. And then people said that he had such refined tastes, and was so exquisitely polished in style and manners! That was a mistake, Mary. I see now that it was not *polish*—real, genuine polish—that we so much admired; it was *varnish*! Very brilliant varnish, I allow, and most skilfully laid on so as to conceal all the defects of the material which it covered; but still, only varnish, which you know cracks, and wears dull enough, as time goes on, or when it is exposed to any kind of test. While polish is the real thing itself, wrought up to smoothness and brilliancy by patient toil and constant care. You may stain and varnish common deal, and very well it looks, but it is only deal and nothing more to the end of the chapter. Who would dream of varnishing or veneering solid mahogany, or fragrant substantial cedar, that is worth ten times more even in its unpolished state than the nicely-finished deal?

So much for woods and all such things as perish in the using. But as to the human creature, it needs Chris-

tianity to polish it effectually, it needs true nobility of heart, kindness, unselfishness, all those virtues which such a man as Horace Trelawny never even dreams of exercising.

Well! I told Walter how we had just finished a delightful *Galoppe*, and were taking breath in the conservatory, when Horace most gracefully proposed, and I as willingly accepted, and he said, "I never could have asked you so, Hilda, even though I had been certain of your answer. Did you ever read '*The Lady's Yes*'—Mrs. Barrett Browning's, you know?"

As it happened, I never had. Indeed, I had never read much of Mrs. Browning's poetry till I came to Bradens-hope; they had only a "selection" at the Blue House. This particular poem I did not in the least recollect, so Walter fetched the book and read it to me. It is a very short one, but it made on me a strong and lasting impression. I think I should like to print it as a "leaflet" and circulate it, by thousands, for the benefit of my own sex, who so frequently get into trouble, and miss the good that might have been their own, simply from want of knowing better! As I cannot make a leaflet of it, I will at least copy it for you, Mary, for I feel pretty sure it will be as unfamiliar to you as it was to myself. This is what Walter read:—

" 'Yes,' I answered you last night,
 'No,' this morning, sir, I say;
Colours seen by candlelight
 Will not look the same by day.

" When the viols played their best,
 Lamps above and lamps below,
Love me sounded like a jest,
 Fit for yes, or fit for no.

" Call me false or call me free,
 Vow, whatever light may shine,
No man on your face shall see
 Any grief for change on mine.

" Yet the sin is on us both;
 Time to dance is not to woo,
Wooing light makes fickle troth,
 Scorn of me recoils on you.

" Learn to win a lady's faith
Nobly, as the thing is high,
Bravely, as for life and death,
With a loyal gravity.

" Lead her from the festive boards,
Point her to the starry skies ;
Guard her by your truthful words
Pure from courtship's flatteries.

" By your truth she shall be true,
Ever true, as wives of yore ;
And her yes once said to you
SHALL be yes for evermore."

The first verses exactly describe the circumstances of my first offer of marriage; the latter ones breathe the very spirit of Walter's proposals. Though he did not point me "to the starry skies," he did to the "everlasting hills;" and he spoke bravely and gravely, as a man should speak, when he asks a woman to give herself to him in holy matrimony.

Did you ever think over that expression—"Holy Matrimony"—Mary? It seems to me that it is, in itself, the holiest thing in a sinful world, though too often it is degraded into a mere legal contract that cannot, in the eyes of God, be much, if any, better than—than those unhallowed bonds on which we all cry *shame!*

Yes, I do think Walter and I plighted our troth as solemnly as we shall make those other and still more binding vows presently before the world. I think we felt that, though drawn together by the sweetest and purest of impulses, it was not only for our own sakes, not simply to please ourselves, that we were to be joined together. We should have our joint work among men; there is so much work for God that is done more fully, as well as more easily, jointly than singly. As married people we shall occupy a certain centre, we shall exercise a certain control over others, as well as certain influences; we shall have to help each other, to cheer and encourage each other in hours of difficulty and sorrow, for we cannot expect—nor should we hope—that our future life should be altogether devoid of cloud or storm. It needs shower as well as sunshine, winter frost and snow as well as

summer heat, to develop the perfect plant in all its beauty of flowers, and in its fulfilment of ripe fruit. And so the soul needs the discipline which God appoints it, though it is hard to bear, and though we shrink as we behold its coming. But *He* gives strength in accordance with our need, and *He* will bring us at last to the haven where we would be.

And blessed are the souls who *together* may brave the tempest and defy the noonday heat; thrice blessed are they who with heart joined to heart may walk hand-in-hand along the chequered path of life, always breathing the prayer, "Father, glorify *Thy* name!" Of all guests bidden to our wedding, may *He* be there who, at the marriage-feast, long centuries ago, in Cana of Galilee, turned the water into wine. True marriage, such as *He* approves, must ever find the miracle renewed. The common water of daily life is henceforth consecrated wine. I think that day at Arnheim, under the old tower, that beautiful, ever-new miracle was wrought for us. Evermore may we drink of that cup of mingled strength and sweetness, and may we, if *He* see fit, drink meekly and patiently, and in childlike faith, of that other cup which *He* may some day, for our soul's health, place in our hands—the cup of grief and pain which *He* for our sakes drained to its most bitter dregs. Did *He* not say, "*Drink ye all of it!*"?

I am not sorry that our marriage may be a little deferred, for I have so much in every way to learn. I do so want to be a *good wife* to my dear Walter, to be his true *help-meet*. I want to be, not only "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone," as the Bible puts it, but soul of his soul! I want to work with him, and to feel with him, to suffer when he suffers, to rejoice when he rejoices, to be in perfect harmony with him, so that our life may be—whether the major or the minor key predominate—"one grand sweet song."

We had quite a discussion the other day—Mrs. Crosbie, Emily, Christina, and I—about what are called "Woman's Rights." That women have not all their rights, especially single women, I am pretty sure. Why should not widows and spinsters, who are as independent as men, who very

often are compelled to do the work of men, and bear the burdens of men, have a voice in their country's legislation? Why should a thoughtful, godly, educated woman be refused a vote, while any ignorant, profane, weak-minded man is welcomed to the poll? Why should the widowed or maiden lady of the manor be excluded from the hustings, while the most sottish, brutal labourer in the county may record his suffrage? This is illogical reasoning, no doubt, and I dare say those who disapprove the movement would in half-a-dozen words put me to silence. But it does *not* seem quite fair that Aunt Dorothy, who has every qualification for the franchise, save her sex, should be denied the prerogative which Gurth, the swineherd, enjoys. Aunt Dorothy is a noble-minded, deep-thinking, far-seeing woman, with a stake in the country, too; Gurth is an excellent swineherd, and he might, perhaps, be trusted to legislate for pigs; but I am quite sure his mind never soars above sties and troughs and the grunting multitude. And actually, aunt does vote through him! Last general election he came to her and said, "Missis, how be I to gie ma vo-at?" Said Aunt Dorothy, "I cannot tell you, Gurth; you must settle that question for yourself. Vote for the best man; that is to say, for the man you believe to be the best." "Ye'd better tell I, missis," quoth the swineherd; "I doant knaw nowt o' blues nor yallers, an' I doant like to wa-aste ma vo-at, an' if I gangs t' poll wi'out knawing my o-wn moind, yallers 'ull pull one way an' blues t'other, an' I shall be reg'lar dementit." "Missis" still refused to give Gurth his orders, and at last he said, "Which on 'em would ye stick up for now if ye'd been a mon?" To which missis replied, "I believe I should 'stick up' for Sir Charles Framling, because in the main his political principles agree with my own views." "That nll do," says Gurth, contentedly, "he'll ha' ma gude wo-ord." And so, in fact, Aunt Dorothy did vote, but by proxy, as it were, whereas she ought to have registered her own vote as Lady of High Endlestone, and in her own name and person.

Married women vote in the person of their husbands, and that is quite sufficient—for man and wife should be

one in politics as well as in religion ; but spinsters and widows, being householders and ratepayers, should certainly be on an equality at least with the enfranchised boor who knows "nowt o' blues nor yallers." And "them's my sentiments," Mistress Mary, and when Walter is in Parliament, as I hope he will be some day, I shall make him support all Bills for the removal of feminine disabilities. Happily, he thinks as I do, so we shall not fall out on that score.

But when women demand equality in some other ways, I cannot go with them. There are some women better and wiser than some men ; but take a man and a woman of the best sort and put them side by side, and my opinion is that the man will have the best of it. "Woman is the lesser man," said Tennyson ; and he was right, at least to my thinking. And I read somewhere a little while ago that it is only a noble woman who can perfectly and willingly obey ; only such a woman knows how to obey ! The smaller souled a woman is the more she is disposed to "*stand up for her rights.*" Of course, I mean only married women. It must be a miserable thing when "rights," great or small, have to be struggled for or even claimed ; it speaks volumes of dissatisfaction and unrest, and proves that there is something out of order in the lives of both wife and husband. Of course, the fault may not be entirely on either side. I trust it may be predicted of us—

"And in the long years liker shall they grow."

I can quite believe that husband and wife, if they do not draw more and more closely together—growing, as it were, into each other's nature, must necessarily drift further and further apart, till at length comes the sad question, unuttered, perhaps, but spoken in the heart, "Why in the days of my youth was I so blind, so foolish ? Why ever did I marry him or her ?" I hope when I am old I may be able to say, "I married him not only because I loved him and because he loved me, but also because I esteemed and reverenced him, and knew that it would be my pride and my pleasure to obey him as my dear and honoured **MASTER.**" No, I am not afraid of the word, it is

a good old household word—"the master!" I should have little patience, I am afraid, with a husband who was not my master. It is just possible I might want to make him my slave—and *then*—! A woman who feels she must either obey or tyrannise ought to be very careful not to wed one who is unworthy to bear sway or incapable of ruling firmly, wisely, tenderly. And that's my ultimatum.

February 4.—I have just heard such news! I could clap my hands, I am so glad. Flossie and Louis are engaged! I always thought it would be. Now I can go to the Blue House when I like; and I do want to go, for Irene's health does not improve, and she would like to have me with her for a little while. Indeed, from what Cynthia told me the other day, I fear she is become quite an invalid. Cynthia is growing so pretty, and so nice and womanly; her hoidenish habits are gradually falling from her; she is quite thoughtful and judicious, and Aunt Rose says a great help to her with the little ones. The twins are still in Paris; they are coming home at Midsummer, and Theodore likewise, though he will return for another year or so. French and German are of so much consequence in these days to a man of business. I must go and write my congratulations. Walter says the Canadian mail is just in, so I may have a letter from Aunt Dorothy to-morrow morning, perhaps this evening, if any one goes to the town—that is Endlestone. Sir Paul does sometimes send for his letters; we have but one daily delivery here.

I have taken to sending you pieces of my diary lately, and I shall send this. It is a queer medley, I am afraid, but it has helped to clear my brain a little and get my thoughts out of tangle. Good-bye, my one faithful friend of other days. Write soon to—HILDA.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ZINGARA AGAIN.

" Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish,
To wish myself much better; yet for you
I would be treble twenty times myself;
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich; that to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
Exceed account; but the full sum of me
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised;
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this, in that
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is, that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.'

THE mail did bring a letter from Mrs. Dorothy. Mr. Rivers was dead, and she was returning home, as soon as certain business arrangements could be completed, together with Mr. William Rivers, the grandson, whom she had previously mentioned.

" How strange it will seem to have a boy at the Grey House," said Hilda, when she had laid down the letter; " a boy, too, who has never been in England—a wild Canadian! I am afraid I am not very fond of boys, though, indeed, I know but very little of them. I must say, however, that Theodore is nice enough. Yet even he makes a great disturbance in the house. Really I cannot fancy Aunt Dorothy managing a rampant young creature of the male species."

" How old is he? " asked Agnes.

" I have no idea. I do not think aunt has ever specified his age, but I should say he is about fourteen, or perhaps a little younger. Yet, when I come to think of it, he can scarcely be a child, because aunt said he had been his grandfather's sole attendant before she came. Well, I hope he will not make himself extremely disagreeable."

"He is sure to be disagreeable," said Agnes. "And he will be unbearably precocious; those colonial youths always are. He will be for setting us all to rights, reforming our religion and our politics, and teaching us high farming; and he will call our lovely lakes 'ponds,' and our beautiful rivers 'ditches.' And he will compare our waterfalls with Niagara, our mountains with the Alleghany Range, and Windermere with Superior or Michigan. I can see him striding among the pigs and the cows, and patronising Mrs. Jessie White, and telling Barnes that he is all wrong in his ploughing and his rotation crops; and he will be tall and lanky, and his jacket sleeves will be too short for him, and his trousers will be three inches above his ankles, and he will be always hitching them up—his trousers, I mean! and perhaps he will wear a jersey, and he will despise gloves, and, I dare say, pocket-handkerchiefs. I wish Mrs. Dorothy joy of the task which awaits her, of licking the Canadian cub into shape."

"Do you know, it strikes me that Aunt Dorothy may succeed with boys better than with girls? The lads on the farm are very fond of her, while the girls and she are always at guerilla warfare; I have seen Bessy Bean scud like a hare if she had a rent in her petticoat, or a shoe down at heel, and the mistress came in sight."

"They must have had a fine time of it since last August. I told Peggy Dawes the other day she would have to make her hair tidy before Mrs. Dorothy came back; and she replied with evident satisfaction, 'She's na' comin' just yet.' But whatever William Rivers may turn out to be, it will not matter to you, Hilda, for the Grey House need not be your home a day longer than you choose. Walter is hurrying on the work at Arnheim. I tell him he is qualifying for a slave-driver, he is urging his people on so mercilessly, in his lover-like anxiety to have all in readiness for your ladyship."

Just then Christina came in from her school, and her first words were, "Hilda! I have seen your gipsy-queen. I met her in the hazel-copse—it is my shortest way home, you know, when the paths are dry."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be, without being actually positive.

She was precisely as you described her—dark, grey-haired, tall and stately. She had on the gold brooch, with the red stones, and the shawl like a Babylonish garment; and there were rings on her brown fingers, and ear-rings in her ears. She looked very proud, and I cannot say she regarded me with an amiable expression of countenance. I might have been the trespasser, and she the daughter of Bradenshawe, from the look she gave me. I thought she was going to speak, but she passed, and you may be sure I did not accost her."

"It must have been she. There could scarcely be two women in the country of the same type. Has she come back to Bradenshawe, I wonder, or has she been here all the winter?"

"We should have heard of her if she had been in the neighbourhood since last summer. I wish you would come upstairs with me, Hilda; I want to consult you about something."

Hilda rose, and followed her friend, and then Christina said, "Don't you think I had better tell papa that I have seen this strange woman? I have thought so much of what you said that she *might* have had something to do with poor Paul. She is no common person, I am sure; but the look of hatred she gave me made me feel quite sick and frightened. I was seized with a sudden horror of the *vendetta*."

"I think Sir Paul ought to know; even if she be the mere Zingara she affects to be, she is not quite the sort of person one would care to have haunting one's premises."

"You never said anything to Walter about the woman's prediction, I suppose?"

"No, indeed, and I never shall. I do not like to think of it myself, though, of course, there is nothing in it. If she has any kind of statement to make, why does she not come here and make it openly? Why, it is seven months since I found her in the forest."

"I had almost forgotten the circumstance when I met her this morning. But now that I have seen her, I am afraid she will haunt my dreams. Something tells me that she *has* an aim—a settled purpose—in coming here."

"There was one thing I did not tell you. I could not then, you know. She distinctly warned me against marrying Walter; not for any unworthiness in himself, but because he would never succeed his father—because he would have to make way for some apochryphal Lord Paolo. 'Wed not the young Lord of Bradenshope,' were her precise words. I am not likely to forget them."

"In spite of this ominous warning, you have decided to wed him, however?"

"Well, yes; the gipsy's prediction would scarcely alter my intention. Even if it were true that he would not inherit Bradenshope, you cannot imagine that it would make any difference to me? It is Walter that I love, not the heir; and if any sort of trouble come to him, I am ready and willing to share it with him. I should be far happier helping him to bear the burdens of life than without him, however free and pleasant my own path might be. But I do think this woman should be looked after; she may talk to the servants as she talked to me."

"I will speak to papa to-night. He has ridden over to Crabb's End to-day. It is his business as a magistrate to make vagrants give an account of themselves; and the woman *is* a vagrant, for she pretended to tell fortunes."

"Yes, but she protested against receiving any money. So long as she claims no payment I should think the law cannot touch her. I do not believe there is any Act of Parliament against the simple act of fortune-telling; still, in this instance, Sir Paul has every right to interfere, I should imagine, for, as far as one can see, she is wandering about the country without any visible means of subsistence. And that certainly constitutes vagrancy."

"No doubt. I shall keep to the open road to-morrow. I do not care to meet her again in that copse."

"I will go with you to-morrow. I am not at all afraid of her. Perhaps she will speak to me."

And so it was settled; but there was further news of the Corsican before the day was over. Agnes found her in the rhododendron-walk when she went out just before dusk for a constitutional.

She was not far from the house, and she knew that one of the gardeners was within call, and, moreover, she was

a brave girl, and was not going to be afraid of one of her own sex. She boldly addressed her, "What are you doing here? Do you know that you are trespassing on private property?"

The woman drew herself up with the air of an empress. "And what are you doing here, Signorina, and who are you that presume to question me? I am no trespasser."

She spoke slowly in good clear English, though with a foreign accent; her speech was as Hilda had described it, and her jewels burned and sparkled in the low red sunset. Nothing daunted, Agnes continued, "But you are a trespasser! these are the private walks belonging to the gardens. Strangers are not supposed to pass the *ha-ha* yonder, unless they have business at the Hall, and then they take the main road there, or the path to the left, leading to the servants' entrances."

"I have business at the Hall. Are you Mees Braden?"

"I am Miss Agnes Braden, and I desire to know your business."

The woman burst into a low, musical laugh, which, nevertheless, Agnes felt to be extremely derisive, and which naturally roused her displeasure.

"If you will not tell it to me," she replied, gravely, "you must tell it to some one who will compel you to speak, and who may punish you for your rudeness and intrusion."

"You are very young, Mees Agnes Braden, or I should be angry with you; as it is, I laugh at you, and I defy any one to compel me to speak against my will. You do not know what you say, nor whom you threaten. And I, too, can threaten, my proud Signorina! No! I tell not my business to a slip of a girl like you, but I *will* tell it to your father, Sare Paolo, or to the young Signor, your brother, whom you call the heir of Bradenshope! *The heir!* *Oh!* *Diascolo!* Yes, I will tell it when I choose, and to whom I choose; to do so came I hither, my Signorina. I am slow to speak—I, Giuditta della Rocca, a Sampiero born—but when I do speak it is not for naught. When Giuditta speaks, those who hear must listen, whether they like it or not. Ah, verily! *Addio!* we meet again very soon. *Addio*, Mees Agnes Braden!"

And away went the Zingara, as they called her, taking a narrow path which led nowhere but into a thicket of huge Portugal laurels, and Agnes lost sight of her. The girl stood confounded, and convinced in her own mind that "Giuditta," whoever she might be, was no common vagrant, no mere gipsy, and though she knew nothing of the apprehensions and surmises of Christina and Hilda, a strange intuition warned her that here was some remnant, some bitter fruits, of poor dead Paul's evil-doings. And yet Agnes had only heard the faintest allusion to that Italian peasant-girl whom her unfortunate brother had deceived.

Slowly she walked back to the house, on which the grey twilight now rested calmly; the last red gleam was still dying slowly, low in the western sky. The air was clear and mild for February, and the thrushes were warbling sweetly in the branches of the leafless trees. Agnes paused to drink in the loveliness of the hour, but a strange sadness subdued her bright young spirit. Was the shadow that rested on the ancient house of Braden never to be lifted? Were the clouds never to be dispelled? Would they return again and again *after the rain?*

"Forbid it, Lord!" was Agnes Braden's prayer, as she stood on the threshold of her home, and marked the peace that brooded over it and around. "Oh, my God, keep far away from my beloved parents the ills that threaten them; let their last days be calm and undisturbed, let not the shadows of the past darken over them as they draw nigh their rest. If evil be at hand, do Thou, Lord, avert it, or if it be Thy will that the blow should fall, give strength to bear the shock, give patience, wisdom, and full faith in Thee."

Then Agnes turned to the other side of the house, to the north terrace, as they called it, and entered by a side door, very generally used by the family when the great hall-door was closed. In the summer-time it stood all day wide open, but at this season of the year it was kept shut and a fire burned always in the hall. The side door was left unfastened till dark, for the more convenient ingress and egress of the household; it was ajar

when Agnes reached it, and she shut it carefully and locked it, determined to tell the butler that it ought not to be open after dark, and certainly not unfastened, for there were tramps and gipsies abroad, and there was a bell which any one coming on legitimate business could ring easily.

It so happened that she encountered Mr. Gregg as she crossed to the great staircase ; the staircase near the north door was very seldom used, as it led straight to the haunted rooms. I think I may say no one ever ascended it after dark.

"The north door open, did you say, Miss Agnes ?" was Gregg's respectful reply. "Are you quite sure, ma'am ?"

"Quite sure. Else how could I have come in without touching the handle ?"

"I shut it myself, ma'am, half an hour ago ; I came in that way, for Mr. Fraser had not sent any fresh flowers for the table, and I went all in a hurry to the greenhouses, where I knew I should find him making all safe for the night. I left the door ajar then, but I am sure I closed it when I returned, for the air was getting sharp on that side of the house. Some one must have gone out afterwards, though I don't know who it could be, for Sir Paul is in his study, and the ladies are all upstairs, and Mr. Braden's with them. I knew you were out, Miss Agnes, and that was why I did not lock the door myself. The servants are not supposed to use that entrance, but it must have been one of them."

"Whoever it was will not return the same way, for the door is fast now."

And then Agnes ran upstairs to her mother's sitting-room, where it was the custom of the family to gather at that hour. Emily was in high spirits exhibiting some newly-reset jewels which she had just received from Philip Harwood. Hilda and Walter were drinking their afternoon tea, *à deux*, at a small table apart from the others, and talking gaily together in a low tone. Christina was explaining some little village affair to her mother. The lamp was not yet lighted, for it was scarcely dark out of doors, and a young moon, with the evening star

near it, was shining like a golden bow, on the calm, purple horizon. There was a blazing fire, too; it was a picture of cosy, simple comfort and sweet home confidences. Agnes thought how happy they all seemed; even Lady Braden was conversing cheerfully, and listening with amused interest to her daughter's narration. She had meant to tell them her adventure at once, but the words died on her lips; she would wait awhile, and speak first to Christina; the girls were always anxious to spare their mother, and it took very little now to make her nervous, and anxious, and consequently unwell. So Agnes held her peace and took her cup of tea without any reference to her walk.

"Why did you go out alone?" asked Emily. "I wanted a constitutional myself, for I was lazy this morning, and I had a long letter to write after luncheon—two, indeed, for I had to write to Madame Marie; and oh, Aggie, it is decided that we go up to town for several weeks next month. It is impossible to get all one's things down here; some of them must be chosen in London. I wish you were going to be married too, Aggie."

"Thank you, my dear; but to marry is a verb that requires an accusative case, as somebody says, and I really have no idea where to find my accusative case at present. Besides, two in one family are enough; let us finish off the two pairs of lovers we already have before we even consider the possibility of a third happy couple. And I mean Chrissie to go next; I am not sure but that I shall stay to plague the old folks, and torment Hilda and Walter whenever opportunity shall offer."

"Oh, we are not afraid!" laughed Hilda. "And remember, two can play at mischief! You might find more than your match in our combined forces. Now, Walter, I am going to dress; you shall read me that debate afterwards. I am not going to be late for dinner twice in one week, and when once you get upon Parliamentary topics there is no knowing when you stop."

"Walter is as bad as that Thomas Diaforns, whom Longfellow mentions in his 'Hyperion,'" said Emily; "the man, you know, who wooed 'the fair Angélique,' and immediately presented her with a medical thesis of

his own, and then invited her to assist at the dissection of 'a subject' on which he was to lecture. Walter is always bringing Hilda some grave pamphlet or some weighty speech, and constantly proposes to her the discussion of some of his pet crotchets. Defend me from a political lover! If I were you, Hilda, I would turn rank Conservative, out of spite."

"Well, you see, one cannot alter one's convictions at will. I could as soon become a Mohammedan as a Conservative—that is, in the political sense of the word; for, of course, there are many things that a right-minded person wishes to *conserve*. But Conservatism, when it relates to national government, means always dull, scornful apathy in its leaders, opposition to progress in any shape, a bolstering up of abuses, and a protest against even most necessary reforms. It means the advancement of a party, not the welfare of a mighty nation. So I can't be a Conservative, even to spite Walter."

"Well done, Hilda!" cried the lively Emily. "Walter must be proud of his pupil. My brother, I congratulate you; your wife and you will be the complement of each other; she will be your friend and companion, as well as the mistress of your establishment."

"I hope so, I am sure," replied Walter. "I can hire a housekeeper, a cook, a sempstress, or any other kind of woman-creature that one requires in domestic life; but, you see, I could not hire a female companion to be my *alter ego*. Hence, I determined to select a wife who would be at once my best friend and *confidante*, and my helpmate—'my other dearer life in life.' I would not marry a woman to whom I could not reasonably hope to say in years to come—

"The kiss,

The woven arms seem but to be
Weak symbols of the settled bliss,
The comfort I have found in thee;
But that God bless thee, dear—who wrought
Two spirits to one equal mind,
With blessings beyond hope or thought,
With blessings which no words can find."

"Oh, if you are beginning upon Tennyson," said

Emily, "I shall go, for you will quote and quote till dinner is on the table. Hilda, I advise you to escape while you can, or make up your mind to dine in your morning dress."

"That would not be so dreadful an alternative," said Lady Braden; "I would forgive her. But, seriously, children, I think you had better go to your rooms now. In fact, I will not have you here any longer; Christina and Agnes are gone already."

"I disappear!" cried Emily, and was as good as her word. Walter and Hilda walked down the long corridor arm-in-arm, and, as they were about to part, Walter said, "Is anything the matter, my sweet?"

"Only that I am so afraid I cannot be all you expect me to be," replied Hilda, smiling through her tears. "And if I should fall short——"

"You will not! I, too, may say—'What if I fall short?' Some things in each other which we did not expect we shall find, I dare say; but love will bind us more and more in one, and our thoughts will be more in unison, and our souls more and more akin, as the years roll on, till perfect oneness of mind and spirit is our happy lot. We shall live for each other, and in each other, and so for God, doing His work in the world, and loving and serving Him with all our hearts. And He will bless us, never fear."

"I do not fear; it was only a passing shadow. When you recited those beautiful lines, I trembled lest you might be disappointed of the 'settled bliss, the comfort,' you have a right to find in me."

"True love always doubts itself, darling. Do you think I never question my own worthiness to be your husband? But, God helping me, my Hilda, I think I can make you happy, and I know I shall be the better and the nobler man for the sweet influences which you have brought, and will bring, to bear upon my life. I am afraid we cannot study our debate before dinner now; we must leave it till afterwards. I am glad, though, we have had this little bit of talk; I am afraid some people would think ours a very strange sort of courtship, we have so many grave things to say to each other."

"I pity those whose courtship is made up of nothing else but sweet phrases and caresses, and honeyed compliments. Let 'some people' think as they like, I am content—ah! much more than content. Walter, I really must go now; there is no reason why we should be unpunctual because we are 'in love,' as people say."

"If there were, we should have to be unpunctual all our lives, because we have agreed that we are never to be out of love; and chronic unpunctuality is not to be endured. Nor am I sure that we should love each other so much if we indulged in the vice of unpunctuality."

CHAPTER XL.

IN THE HAUNTED ROOMS.

"The gipsy-queen came o'er the green,
And three little words spake she;
Three little words she spake with power,
And pale as death grew he."

WHEN Hilda reached her room she began to dress with all possible despatch, and as her toilet was no very elaborate performance she was ready before the first bell rang. She was just thinking that, after all, there might be plenty of time for her parliamentary reading with Walter, when Christina called from her own chamber, "Do come here, Hilda, and hear what Aggie has to say!"

And then Hilda went, and listened to the story we have already related.

"This is getting serious," said Christina. "The woman evidently means mischief, and she will waylay papa or Walter, and pour her tale into their ears at the first opportunity. I shall try to speak to papa to-night; nothing is worse than to have a mystery hanging over one."

"And such a mystery," replied Agnes; "I feel so sure it has to do with poor Paul. Surely this woman could not have been his wife? She certainly inferred that she had a right to be about the place, and was angered by my reminding her that she was a trespasser; but that may mean something or nothing."

"Wife? Oh no! not his wife, I should say," was Hilda's comment. "She is—well—not exactly an old woman, but very near to it; she may not be more than forty-five, perhaps, but that is old for an Italian. I dare say she is a grandmother. If there were any complications with Paul, it would be in connection with her daughter, or niece, perhaps; I can quite understand her espousing the cause of any of her kindred."

"Hush! here comes Hester," interrupted Christina. Hester was the girl who waited upon the young ladies, and she had been sent away from the room when Agnes came to talk to her elder sister. She now returned with a message from Emily. Miss Emily wanted a certain sandal-wood casket, in which she believed were some sleeve-links of her own.

"The sandal-wood casket!" answered Christina; "where did I put it now? I thought it contained nothing but the materials for those feather flowers, and a few seed-pearls. I am almost sure it is in the little blue dressing-room—we sat there last week, you know, when we were messing with that foolish *decalcomanie*; I was rummaging the casket for something I could not find. Go and see, Hester; I think you will find it on one of the tables; and take care of your candle."

"Oh, please, ma'am!" gasped Hester, looking imploringly at Miss Braden; "indeed, ma'am, I could not go there; I would not if I was to get a fortune for it. Why! I must go into *that* corridor!"

"Well! and what of that? The ghosts, if there were any, went away for good and all long ago; they have not been seen in my time, nor in my father's."

"But they've been *heard*, ma'am! Indeed, I have heard them myself, and I would take my Bible oath of it; I'm not one to take up things, ma'am—I'm not. I laughed myself when first I was told about the ghosts, but I don't

laugh now; and, what's worse, there is a whisper in the servants'-hall that they're seen again."

"What—who are seen again?"

"The ghosts, ma'am; at least, one of them. Oh, could not they be *properly* laid, Miss Braden? I know ghosts can be laid, for there was one as was a dreadful nuisance in the place I came from—where I was born, down south—and it was laid with a book and a bell and a candle, by the parson, and sent to the Red Sea, as I've heard my old grandmother tell many and many a time."

"Why should the Red Sea be bothered with all the superfluous ghosts of other lands, I wonder?" said Hilda, laughingly.

"Did your grandmother ever say, Hester?"

"I don't think she ever did, Miss Capel; but I have heard it was because of King Pharaoh and all his army being drowned there—and that's in the Bible, ma'am, so we know it's true."

"We know that Pharaoh and his host were drowned, following after the Israelites, but nothing is said about ghosts, past or present."

"And are the banished ghosts supposed to stay in the Red Sea?" asked Agnes.

"Well, ma'am, they don't exactly stay there, for they begin to come back again as soon as ever they're sent. But they can only take one step in seven years, and so it doesn't much matter. If the Bradenshope ghost was properly *laid* in the Red Sea, it would never trouble the family any more."

Hilda and Agnes laughed again, but Miss Braden said gravely: "I am very sorry to hear you talking so foolishly, Hester; I hoped people had more sense in these days than to listen to the tales of their grandmothers, who had but little opportunity of learning better. However, I will not insist on your going for the casket; I will fetch it myself."

"No," said Hilda; "you are not ready for dinner, and I am. I remember now where you put it, and I will go for it. I am not at all afraid of the ghosts." And so Hilda went, to Hester's intense satisfaction. The Blue Room was only just within the dreaded corridor; the haunted precincts lay beyond. The casket was where

Hilda expected to find it, on one of the little inlaid, spider-legged tables in the Blue Dressing Room, which was just as it was left by the young ladies, the *decalcomanie* litter strewn carelessly about. Hilda took up the casket, and came out into the corridor again, and then a curious idea took possession of her—rather, as it were, a *sensation* of not being alone in that solitary north wing. Something like a shiver passed over her as she looked down the long passage, by the dim light of the candle she carried; but she said to herself, “I will *not* be so absurd! Is it nerves, I wonder? or is it folly, childish fear, and ingrain superstition? These rooms are just the same as the other rooms; and even if they were not, God is in them. He is as much here as in the church yonder, and the darkness and the light are both alike to Him. Now, just for my own discipline, I will walk through all the rooms and have another look at the *Medicis* cabinet. I sat there composedly enough with Walter not so many weeks ago, and last summer we were often there. I dare say I shall find everything exactly as we left it last time. What a heroine Hester will think me when I tell her I have been through all the haunted rooms. They will all say I am not wanting in courage. Here goes then! Emily must wait five minutes longer for her sleeve-links.”

And suiting the action to the word, Hilda entered the first of the deserted rooms. All was silence, solitude, and dust. She passed into another and another, and in the last—which was immediately adjoining the Cabinet or Tapestry Room—she was amazed to behold a plate, with a knife and fork and some bones upon it! Close by the plate was a little horn-cup, with a curious silver rim, half filled with liquid. Had the Bradenshope ghost taken to private banquets? Did he or she feast on cold boiled pork, and drink claret and water, or something that looked very much like it?

As Hilda gazed, and even touched the common willow-pattern plate, she heard, very near to her, a long-drawn, shuddering sigh, that was almost a groan; then another hollow, sepulchral sound—a voice of anguish and despair. She stood motionless, as if riveted to the spot; she felt a cold perspiration steal over her whole body, her knees

shook under her, her hands trembled, even her teeth began to chatter. Still she tried to be valiant, and called out, though in rather shaky tones, "Who is there?" And she took one step towards the door of the next chamber.

The door, which was a little way open, was suddenly slammed in her face, and at the same time the stream of air extinguished her candle, and she was left in total darkness, while an awful rushing sound, and something between a wail and a moan, echoed through the lonely place. And Hilda, in spite of her daring and her plain good sense, was so terrified that she could not stir. As she stood, scarcely knowing whether this were not some horrible nightmare of a dream, she heard the dinner-bell ringing loudly, but, as it were, with a dulled and muffled clang. It roused her, however, and she moved to find the door, and after a little groping succeeded; it seemed an interminable time before she once more reached the lighted gallery, which led to her own room. She found only Christina, ready to descend, and waiting for her. "I was just coming after you," said Miss Braden, as Hilda set down the casket. "Why! what is the matter? You look as if you had been actually interviewing the ghosts!"

Hilda only gasped, and seemed inclined to cry.

"What is it, darling? Some one has been frightening you! Drink some water, and smell my salts. I wish I had some wine here."

"Dear me! what a simpleton I am!" said Hilda, smiling through her tears. "Yes, I have been frightened; my nerves are not so strong as I thought them. Christina! there is something—somebody in the Tapestry Room, where the Medicis cabinet is."

"Are you sure? The wind is rising, and there are rats in that part of the building."

"Rats do not shut doors in one's face."

"But the wind might. There is the second bell. Come, my dear Hilda, let us go down. The lamps, and company, and your dinner will soon set your nerves to rights."

"But there really is some one there, Christina. Suppose it should be a robber! suppose there is a gang!"

" Suppose there is a megatherium ! Some of the servants are playing pranks, depend upon it ; one or two of the bolder spirits are amusing themselves with the terrors of the others. It must be looked to, of course, but we must get through dinner quietly ; it will not do to frighten mamma, and the least thing scares her now. Come, the colour is coming back to your face."

Partly because she had no strength to resist or explain, and partly because it really was inexpedient to do anything which might excite or disturb Lady Braden, Hilda obeyed, and followed Christina to the dining-room, where they were gently rallied by Sir Paul and Walter as loiterers. " Though I believe it is my fault," said the latter, " as far as Hilda is concerned, for I kept her talking long after the dressing bell had rung."

It seemed to Hilda as if that dinner never would be over. She took her soup without the smallest idea of its flavour, and the delicate slice of guinea-fowl which Walter put upon her plate might have been the coarsest piece of beef or mutton, for all she perceived to the contrary. She was thinking of the pork-bones, and the wine and water in that distant chamber in the disused north wing, and feeling that a terrible responsibility rested upon her as long as her story remained untold ; for that it was neither the wind nor rats that shut the door and made those unearthly noises she was perfectly assured ; nor was she at all inclined to accept Christina's theory of mischievous servants playing on the terrors of their companions. There was some one in the house who had no business there—and the "some-one" might be somebodies, and the somebodies might be burglars, hiding themselves in the deserted apartments till the family retired to rest. She could hardly command herself while the sweets were being slowly discussed ; she could hardly wait in patience till it pleased Lady Braden to rise and lead the way to the drawing-room, and she whispered to Walter, as she passed him at the door— " Don't linger, please ; I want to speak to you as quickly as possible."

And there was that in Hilda's pale face which surprised Mr. Braden, and told him that she had something of un-

wanted importance to communicate. Sir Paul never sat over his wine, but he generally went to his own study for an hour or more, after the ladies withdrew. Walter therefore had nothing to detain him, and he hastened to the drawing-room and at once asked Hilda to come with him into the conservatory, where the lovers very often spent a portion of their evening. Indeed, Christina used to laugh and declare that it was lighted up at nights solely for their convenience. "Now then, what is it all about?" said Walter, as he drew Hilda into a seat beside him.

And then she told him how she had been startled—nay, alarmed—in the north wing, not an hour ago, and how Chrissie concluded that the servants were playing tricks.

"It is most likely," he replied. "I see no other explanation. Some one evidently was there; and even if we believed in the family ghost—which we do *not*!—the pork-bones, and the door slammed to, would at once dissipate the idea of a spiritual occupant of the rooms. Ghosts do not use willow-pattern plates, nor would they be so rude as to violently close a door in a lady's face, I should hope; unless, indeed, it were one of the ill-conditioned modern ghosts who play rude pranks at fashionable séances. A Braden, in the flesh or out of it, would always be polite. But it must not pass; you were quite right to mention it to me, and to say nothing before the mother. I will go at once and explore the north rooms."

"Oh, do not go alone."

"My dear child, there is no danger; the person who was there has doubtless retired, alarmed by your unexpected invasion. However, I shall sift it to the bottom, and, if necessary, speak to my father. We have never locked up the rooms, the servants generally giving them as wide a berth as they can."

"Still, I do not like you to go unaccompanied. Suppose robbers should be concealed there! It would be so easy to hide in that wing till all the house was quiet. I really think unused rooms ought to be kept closed—ghosts or no ghosts."

"The only robbers we have in these parts are tramps and gipsies, who at rare intervals visit the farmers'

poultry-yards. There has never been any raid on Bradens-hope; we never lost so much as a chicken, except a few taken by vermin."

"Let me go with you."

"On no account. If any danger is to be faced, you shall not share it. I will take Gregg with me to please you, or, perhaps, Thomas; he is a younger man, and would show fight if requisite. I will summon him at once."

"Very well. But I must go as far as the Blue Room, and then I can give the alarm if you want help."

To this Walter could make no objection, and he and Hilda left the conservatory together. Thomas was called, and immediately volunteered to accompany his young master; and when questioned as to those reports which Hester declared were current among the servants, admitted that there had been a great deal of foolish talk for the last few days, and that the maids went about the house after dusk in twos and threes. Strange noises had been heard, and one of the laundry-women had been in fits for hours through having met the ghost face to face in the passage leading from the laundry to the north corridor.

Walter felt very much annoyed; Mr. Braden was by no means proud of his ancestral ghosts, for, as he observed, "whenever they appeared something illicit among the servants was invariably discovered." Then he inquired of Thomas, "How long has this folly been going on? When did it begin?"

"I only heard of it the day before yesterday, sir," replied the young man. "The housemaids and Miss Hester were telling about the queer noises they had heard when they were about their duties in the evening, all coming, as they said, from the haunted rooms."

"Why did you not tell me at once?"

"Laws, sir! I thought it was only the girls' chatter; they do like to have something dreadful to gossip about. I have known them sit over the fire of nights and tell ghost stories, till a mouse running across the floor would have frightened them out of their senses. They must have something to talk about, you know, sir, in a lone place like this!"

"But the laundress! What does she profess to have seen?"

"A *ghostess*, Mr. Braden! A tall, stately woman, like a queen, with grey hair, and a sort of crown on her head, and the awfullest black eyes, and she looked poor Betsy Sudds right in the face; and Betsy, she stood for a moment maze-like, not a yard between her and the ghostess; then she took to her heels, and ran screaming to the laundry, where she went out of one fit into another, till Mrs. Maxwell came and scolded her well for her silliness. But Betsy, she was not to be daunted by any scolding, and she persisted that she had seen the ghost, and that was yesterday afternoon, just as it was getting dark."

"Very well! now you and I, Thomas, will go and pay the ghostess a visit. You are not afraid?"

"I, sir? Bless you, *no*; not a bit of it. I don't mind an army of ghosts, or ghostesses either. But I'll carry a good stout cudgel, if you have no objection, Mr. Braden. A ghost that doesn't know its proper place wants to be reminded of it, and a good whacking might be ever so instructive."

"But this is a lady-ghost, Thomas! Surely you would not 'whack' a ghost of the gentler sex!"

"I don't know, sir; I wouldn't lay my finger on a woman, of course not! But, then, *is* a ghostess a woman? I doubt she's not! Any way, if I didn't *whack* her, I'd tackle her; I'd hold her so fast, she couldn't get away. I'm ready, sir."

Up the back stairs sped the two young men. Thomas with his cudgel, Walter with a pistol, which, however, was not loaded. Hilda quietly followed, and took up her station at the Blue Room door, ready for whatever might ensue. She had not long to wait, for in less than two minutes Walter came back to where she stood. "The bird has flown!" he cried; "but some one has been there. Come along, Hilda. Here are the plate and the bones, and—yes, actually *mustard*! What a fastidious ghost! A regular *gourmet* of a ghost! And some one has been sleeping in the bed of the Tapestry Chamber, *minus* bed-linen, of course."

Yes; there were the willow-pattern plate, bones, mustard and all, but the silver-rimmed cup was gone. In the Tapestry Chamber nothing was missing, though several things were disarranged, and a piece of wax candle was still burning in one of the antiquated silver sconces attached to the cumbrous toilet-table. It was manifest that the room was in occupation. Walter began to look serious ; he felt persuaded that it was no servant's prank, that some one was actually concealed in the deserted wing —some one, of course, who had no right to be there, and whose intentions could scarcely be other than nefarious. Still, where was the bold intruder ? They searched every closet and every corner, looked under the beds, opened all the old-fashioned *awmries*, and even examined the tapestry and the curtain folds ; there was no sign of any human creature. A bright-eyed little mouse was the only living thing they found. The Blue Room was searched, too, and without result ; the uninvited guest must be, therefore, in the inhabited portion of the building.

"This beats all !" said Thomas, when every nook and cranny had been twice or thrice explored ; "and we must get to the bottom of it before we sleep. It don't do to let ghostesses as sup on cold boiled pork and light wax candles go roaming about the house after dark, no one knows where, nor on what business. I'd better go and speak to Mr. Gregg, and see if the plate is all right, and then there are the jewels and the ladies' trinkets generally."

"And, in the meantime, the door at the end of the corridor must be locked," said Mr. Braden ; "our fox must not run back to covert. Hilda, would you mind going to Mrs. Maxwell, and asking her to bring the key, which I believe is in her keeping, while I keep guard here ? Thomas had better go to Gregg, as he proposes. If there should be any one with Mrs. Maxwell, call her aside ; I don't want, if I can avoid it, to make a hue and cry."

Hilda went, hunted out the housekeeper, briefly informed her that there had been some one concealed in the north wing, and was on her way back, closely followed by Mrs. Maxwell, when long and loud rang out

the library-bell. It echoed through the house. Walter, in the far-off Tapestry Chamber, heard it in amaze; Hilda stopped suddenly on the lowest step of the north staircase; Mrs. Maxwell turned pale. No such peal had rung within those walls since that dreadful morning when the lady of Bradenshope found her eldest-born lifeless upon his bed!

"What bell is it?" asked Hilda.

"It's the library-bell, Miss Capel," replied the house-keeper, "and it's Sir Paul that rings it. Something must have happened; he never rings like that—enough to wake the dead!—I wonder my lady don't come flying!"

It so happened that Agnes and Emily were at that precise moment playing a crashing duet *finale* on the grand pianoforte in the drawing-room, and so drowned the loud reverberations of the bell; but Christina, who had strolled into the conservatory, had heard it, and lost no time in rushing to the scene of action. Full well she knew that the bell was rung in the library, where her father was, and at once she remembered Hilda's disclosures, and anticipated some disaster. Walter, too, ran quickly down, and asked with some trepidation, "Maxwell, was not that the library-bell?"

Being answered in the affirmative, he forgot all about the key which Mrs. Maxwell was bringing, and flew towards the library, Hilda at his side, Thomas at a respectful distance, and Mrs. Maxwell shrinking back, in sudden terror of she knew not what. But Miss Braden was before them, and so was Mr. Gregg. The door was already opened, and Christina was standing by her father, who lay back in his chair, not exactly fainting, but frozen, as it seemed, with blank horror and surprise. At a little distance, calmly seated in a chair, some letters and documentary-looking papers in her hands, her jewels sparkling in the lamplight, and her brilliant scarf lying at her feet, was—the *Zingara*! the Corsican, the queen of the gipsies, or whatever you may please to call her.

CHAPTER XLI.

GIUDITTA DELLA ROCCA.

“ ‘Tis a strange story that you tell,
And yet it flavours of the truth.”

HILDA and Christina at once comprehended the situation—the Corsican was disclosing to Sir Paul the extraordinary story at which she had rather more than hinted on two previous occasions. Walter looked amazed, nor did he at first connect his father’s strange visitor with the Zingara who had figured in Hilda’s little adventure some months previously; also, it must be remembered that he had never been informed of her predictions, or assertions, as regarded his own position as heir of Bradenshawe. He felt pretty well convinced, however, that he saw before him the mysterious tenant of the haunted rooms. Here was the laundry-maid’s “*ghostess!*” Here was the substantial spectre, who had supped—perhaps dined—on cold boiled pork, and solaced herself with wine-and-water, and made her weird toilet before the antique mirror in the Tapestry Chamber!

Sir Paul, in the presence of his son, rapidly resumed his composure, and calmly addressed his visitor.

“ It is well that my son and his future wife and my eldest daughter should hear what you have to say, nor need my faithful servants withdraw. What you tell me is either a terrible fact or it is—a *lie!* You cannot expect me to receive such tidings as welcome news.”

“ What is it all about, father? ” asked Walter. “ What has this woman to do with us, and who is she? ”

“ I am Giuditta della Rocca,” replied the woman, speaking for herself, “ and I am a Sampiero. Your brother Paul, the eldest-born of his father here, married my youngest daughter Giacinta nearly five years ago, as I am prepared to prove in your own English courts of law.”

“ My brother Paul never gave us the least hint of his being a married man,” was all that Walter could say.

The entire conviction with which the woman spoke strongly impressed him ; at the same time, he felt it scarcely possible that a lawful form of marriage could ever have passed between poor, misguided Paul and this unknown Giacinta.

"Perhaps not," answered Giuditta ; "he would scarcely do that, when he wickedly repented of his marriage—when he hid from his wife his true name and lineage, and pretended to be a poor travelling artist, living entirely on the products of brush and canvas."

"There was no pretence in that," said Sir Paul, gravely ; "my son had angered me past endurance, and when he vowed that he would leave his home and trouble me no more, I let him go, thinking it well that he should learn the stern lesson of self-denial and self-dependence. It was well, I thought, that he should know what his powers really were; that he should go free of the flatteries of those who courted and applauded, not the man, Paul Braden, but the heir of Bradenshope. A sojourn in the Valley of Humiliation would do him good, would show him, more forcibly than any words of mine, his true place in the world. He vowed that he would never more ask me to fill his purse; he boasted that he would win gold, and plenty of it, for himself. Like many another spoiled youth, he believed himself to be a marvellous genius. He kept his word—he did *not* come to me for money; while he remained in Italy he earned his own living as an artist—a poor travelling artist, as you observe. There was no deceit in that—he was simply what he represented himself to be."

"He was the heir of Bradenshope for all that, signor ; and his son—my Giacinta's child—stands now in his place. I know all about your English law ; for the sake of my daughter and her little Paolo, I gave myself to understand it ; you cannot make or unmake your heirs at will ; they are like the great singers and orators of all nations—they are born, they are not made."

"In some cases it is thus. It is so in the present instance ; if the boy Paolo be really the child of my dead son Paul, and born in lawful wedlock, he must be my heir, however greatly to my regret. But before I admit

his claims, I must be fully satisfied that a perfectly valid marriage took place between Mr. Braden and your daughter, and you must also prove that this infant whom you bring forward is actually the issue of such marriage."

"For what do you take me, signor?" cried Giuditta, indignantly; "do you suppose I would palm upon you a little impostor—what you would call a supposititious child? I am a Sampiero! And a Sampiero, let me tell you, never lies—no! not even when he is sworn to the *vendetta*! Behold the proofs!"

She held forth the papers, and Walter and Hilda read them over Sir Paul's shoulders. There were three letters from Paul Braden to Giacinta della Rocca, commencing "*sposa mia*," ending with the usual "*mariò vostro*," and signed "*Giovanni Paolo*." The handwriting was indubitably Paul's, and one of the letters bore the familiar Braden crest; he had evidently chosen to be known by his Christian name only during his Italian wanderings. There was also a certificate, or copy of certificate, of marriage, which, however, Sir Paul could not read; Walter and Hilda puzzled over it; but Christina, who was a really good Italian scholar, deciphered it easily. It set forth in a rather quaint fashion that on a certain day, and at a certain place, John Paul, of Bradenshope, England, had espoused, according to the ritual and the usage of the Church of Rome, Giacinta della Rocca, youngest daughter of the late Pietro della Rocca and Giuditta Sampiero, his wife, of Sta. Lucia di Tallano. The marriage had taken place at an obscure Italian village in the Apennines; the name of the officiating priest, Father Cristoforo, of Rimesso, was appended, together with those of several witnesses. The document was curiously worded, and not particularly well spelt; it might be either false or genuine.

"Read it aloud from the beginning, *signorina mia*," insisted the woman; and when Christina had done as she requested, she exclaimed, triumphantly, "Now you comprehend that I make no vain boast. The marriage took place, as the certificate sets forth, and Father Cristoforo and two of the witnesses are still alive, and will give their testimony. Is it not enough?"

"No," said Sir Paul, gravely. "It seems to me that there are certain flaws in this paper which would prevent the marriage from standing in this country. The bridegroom is married only by his Christian name, and he was not a Roman Catholic, therefore no Roman Catholic rite would be legally binding on him, unless, indeed, the ceremony were repeated according to the ritual of his own Church. You see, it is simply John Paul, not John Paul Braden, who took legally or illegally Giacinta della Rocca to wife."

"The Signor Paolo was a Catholic," replied Giuditta. "He went to mass—sometimes; he was not devout; but his religion, so far as it went, was the same as Giacinta's."

"My son never professed himself of any other communion than that of the Church of England, in which he was baptized and educated. He was *not* devout—I grieve to say it; but nominally, at least, he was a Protestant."

"He went to mass," persisted Giuditta, sullenly; "I will swear it! The good priest would never have profaned the holy rites of the Church by administering to a heretic the sacrament of matrimony. He was a good Catholic; I will swear it!"

"Did he pray to the Virgin and to the saints?"

"Yes; for he knelt with his wife at the shrine of our Blessed Lady, and he made an offering of wax-tapers to San Paolo immediately after the marriage."

"At the instance of his reputed wife, I should imagine," said Christina. "I knew my brother Paul so well that I feel assured he never on his own account performed an act of superstition. The views which he held, both before and after his Italian wanderings, were as far removed as possible from invocations of saints and votive offerings. Of religion, I am compelled to say, he had but little, and his theology was what we call in England 'broad,' or, rather, 'advanced.' That, however, you will scarcely comprehend; you will but perceive the force of what I say when I tell you that my brother believed in *no* Church; that he laughed not only at the legends of Rome, but at the faith of the Church of England. You tell me that he bowed the knee at the Virgin's shrine, and that I can imagine possible, for he would do it to humour the pre-

judices of Giacinta, and she must have persuaded him to place the tapers on the altar of San Paolo ; but I should not fear to risk my life on the absolute certainty of my brother Paul's nominal Protestantism. You cannot show that he was formally received into the Church of Rome ? ”

“ I don't know what that may mean, signorina. I thought him undevout, truly ; but it never occurred to me that he had been reared a heretic.”

“ It might have occurred to you, seeing that you knew him for an Englishman, and we English are a nation of heretics, as your Church deems it. Did he go to confession ? ”

“ Not that I know of. That is nothing, though ; so many men are undevout. It is principally we women who confess—who are the good Catholics. Men, for the most part, are infidels ; they believe nothing. The Signor Paolo was not the less a Catholic because he did not believe in the saints, or go to confession. My own husband, though he died at last fortified by the rites of the Church, Our Lady be thanked ! never went to confession after he was thirty years of age. Nor did he honour the saints—only the Madonna ; and yet no one would have questioned his being a good Catholic.”

“ Probably not,” replied Christina. “ But here the case is quite different. Your husband was baptized in the Church of Rome ; he probably confessed and was confirmed in his youth. My brother was certainly baptized and confirmed in the Church of England, as we rather presumptuously call one section of the Christian Church in this land, and the last religious rites in which he participated were those of this English Church. It is, therefore, quite impossible that the Romish communion should claim him. And as a Protestant, his marriage with your daughter was not valid in his own country. He must have known that at the time.”

“ Do you dare to tell me, signorina, that my pure and innocent Giacinta was—what you would not care to name ? ”

“ The pure and innocent may be deceived. I do not doubt that Giacinta believed herself to be a lawfully-wedded wife ; and in her own country she probably was

so. I do not know enough of Roman Catholic usage or of Italian law to be sure about it. But if, according to English law, the marriage was invalid, we could not, even if we would, acknowledge her child as my father's heir, though we might honour Giacinta as truly our brother's wife. Law is law, and we cannot evade it."

"My daughter says truly," interrupted Sir Paul. "The marriage may have been a good one in the community where it took place, and your Giacinta may be blameless before God and before man; but till the union is *proved* valid and conclusive, the child Paolo can have no right to the succession you would claim for him."

"And if it be proved that Giacinta and your son were lawfully man and wife, what then?"

"Then—their son is my lawful and undisputed heir, and nothing and no one can keep him from his inheritance. As Miss Braden remarked, 'Law is law,' and it must stand; nor should we attempt to evade it."

"Then I am content, for it *will* be proved. I have seen one of your learned men of law in London, and he says the marriage is a good one. Besides, have you not your son's own handwriting before you, and does he not address my Giacinta as *sposa mia—sposa carissima?*?"

"That is not sufficient evidence when results of so much consequence are in question. I shall go up to London, and place the matter in the hands of my own solicitor—the family solicitor of the Bradens, who knew all about poor Paul. Do not fear. Your grandson shall have justice; even if his claim to the title or to the estates be disproved, he shall be provided for as the son of an English gentleman—that is to say, if I am thoroughly convinced that my son, Paul Braden, was indisputably his father."

"When you see the boy you will not doubt that, Signor Paolo—or Sare Paul, I should say; and Giacinta has her husband's portrait, painted by himself on ivory, and set in Venetian gold. She has also some English books of his, with his name written therein. It was through one of these that I discovered his *full* name; and she has I know not how many unfinished pictures of his; for he—your son—was wanting in the virtue of perseverance.

He made countless grand beginnings. I don't know that he made one good ending! He was fond of change. And so he tired of the simple home-life at Rimesso, and he tired of his young wife, who loved him—ah! with such devotion. So he left her, and he never saw his child's face."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Sir Paul. "I am glad to know he did not desert his child. It was bad enough to forsake its mother as he did, whatever was the tie between them. He did speak of Giacinta—but not as his wife; of the existence of the child he gave no hint."

"Dared he speak of Giacinta as of a light woman?"

"He implied nothing disrespectful of your daughter. He said that he had fallen in love with a beautiful Italian girl, and that he had left her; but he did not say that any form of marriage had passed between them. In fact, he spoke but vaguely on the subject, and that upon one or two occasions only."

"He showed me a nearly-completed portrait of an Italian peasant girl," interrupted Christina, "and he called it 'Giacinta,' but he said nothing which could lead me to suppose that this was the beauty with whom he had fallen in love. I thought he had just seen a charming *contadina*, and painted her, after the fashion of artists. I told him he ought to finish the picture, and he said he would some day when he was in the humour, but that lately he had grown sick of brush and palette. And he added, 'If ever I do have the thing framed, I shall exhibit it, and call it *La Giacinta*.'"

"And was it ever finished?"

"No; it stands now, just as it did then, in the painting-room, with many others. You shall see it tomorrow."

"Thank you, signorina; but now that I have spoken to you all I must return to Giacinta and her child. Tomorrow I go from this to London."

"Is Giacinta in London, then?"

"She is. I was advised by our kindred to bring her to her husband's country. It would be impossible, they said, to prove the rights of our little Paolo anywhere but in England."

"But why," asked Walter, "did you not appear before? My brother has been dead more than two years; it will be three years in April since he came home to Bradenshope. For nearly three years, then, Giacinta has been widowed, and her child orphaned. Why have you left their claim so long disregarded?"

"You English never understand!" exclaimed Giuditta, impatiently. "First of all, I must tell you that Giacinta married without my consent—and secretly. I never guessed that she was a wife till she could conceal the fact no longer. I did not approve of the young man; there was something wild and untrustworthy about him, and I wished her to marry Luigi, a rich *fattore*, who had loved her while she was no more than a child. I was very angry when she clung to the Englishman and his paltry little pictures. We were poor, but we had good blood in our veins. I did not think your son, as I knew him, a fitting match for my beautiful girl, descended, too, from the Sampierii! I threatened Giacinta, and she was undutiful. She fled to her father's kinsfolk at Rimesso, and I knew not whither she had gone. When next I saw her, her husband—Giovanni Paolo, as we called him—had deserted her, and she was on the point of becoming a mother. She came back to me *then*, a poor, blighted, drooping creature, like a bright bird that has been caged and roughly handled, and let fly when all its strength and spirit were gone, its keen eye dimmed, and its plumage torn and soiled. What could I do but take her to my heart, for am I not her mother? and could a mother reproach her, erring though she was? But first I said to her, 'Giacinta mia, is there shame on your head? for if there is, you and I will go far away together, where none shall know your folly, and none shall ever taunt you with disgrace.'

"Then she spoke proudly up—my beautiful, stately Giacinta—and she made answer, 'For what do you take me, *madre mia*? I am an undutiful child, but not disgraced—oh no! not disgraced! Am I not, too, a Sampiero?—and a Sampiero ever chooses death in preference to dishonour! I am a wedded wife; I swear it before Our Lady, and by Santa Rosalia. Nay, I swear it be-

fore God Himself.' Then she told me all her story. The stranger had proved himself treacherous, and he was gone—she could not guess whither! He left her with little money, and, what was worse to her, poor wounded dove, without one kind farewell word. He left her far away from her own kindred—in a great city, where she had no friends. I cursed him deep and loud, when I heard how he had betrayed my innocent child; and may my curse cling to him for ever and ever!"

"Hush! hush!" cried both Christina and Hilda, and Sir Paul turned deadly pale; but Walter said, sternly, "Remember, signora, to whom you speak, and where. Curses, they say, like tame birds, *come home to roost*."

"Could a mother do aught but curse the cruel traitor? And if the child were not his child, and so born to this inheritance, there would have been something worse than curses. But you asked me why I delayed so long in coming here, and I have not yet told you. At first the child was delicate and puny, and I thought he would die—I *hoped* he would, for his false father's blood was in his veins. But when he was a few months old he grew strong and healthy, and I learned to love him—for was he not also of my own blood, and was not Giacinta's whole soul in her little one? The boy was nearly a year old when my daughter told me that she was sure her husband was other than he seemed. And one day there came an English lord from Naples, and he had seen Giacinta before, and knew her again, and he told us who Giovanni Paolo really was—that he was heir to a great estate and to a title; but he did not say the name of the family nor of the estate; he could not, he said, disclose what his friend had not chosen to reveal. Giacinta wanted to send a message to her husband, and then the Signor informed her that Paolo was *dead*. It was a shock to Giacinta, of course, but not what it would have been had he treated her even tolerably well; and then said I, 'Figlia mia, if thy rascal of a Paolo was a great lord in his own country, his son must likewise be a person of importance. He shall have his father's rights. Thy wrongs shall be redressed in some small measure, at least.' Then I swore to myself that the babe should stand in his false father's

place, and I resolved to travel to England and find out all about the Bradens of Bradenshope, for I had discovered the name the stranger lord would not tell from the blank leaf of an English book, left carelessly in Giacinta's keeping. I knew that if I came openly I had no chance, so I disguised myself as a wandering gipsy, and hunted for Bradenshope until I found it. That young lady—the Signorina Hilda—will remember her meeting with me in the wood last summer, and she will remember, too, my warning her against the heir, who was no heir while little Paolo lived. I liked her; I knew her for a woman of noble nature, and I did not wish that she should be deceived."

"What is this?" asked Walter, astonished, turning to Hilda. "You knew last summer that there was another claimant to the heirdom of Bradenshope?"

"I knew nothing. I only heard what sounded to me like gipsy's jargon. I told it all to Christina and Sir Paul—to no one else. For at first it seemed to me that your *death* was prophesied, and it could not be well, I thought, that you should know it. I will explain more fully another time."

"I remained here in my disguise," resumed Giuditta, "for nearly a month, and I found out everything I wished to know about the family of my daughter's husband. I went back to London, where first I set foot on English soil, and I consulted a man of law, and told him my story. He said I must bring proofs, full proofs, that could not be contradicted though they were contested, and that I had better be silent till I had all the necessary documents in my hands. He advised also that Giacinta and the child should be in the country.

"Accordingly, I returned home, and during the winter I busied myself in procuring such evidence as would be required. I visited Rimesso, and received the testimony of Father Cristoforo, and of several of his parishioners, who had witnessed the marriage; then I hastened back to London with Giacinta and the little one, saw them safely in lodgings in the house of a Bolognese of good repute, and came here some few days ago."

"To the village, or to this house?"

"To the village in the first instance, afterwards to the house. I knew all about the haunted rooms, and conjectured that I should have very little difficulty in hiding myself there for hours or days, as seemed most expedient. I wished to make further observations, and to ascertain several things before I made my appearance. I had some wine and bread with me, and I made a raid on your larder early this morning before your servants were about. When I discovered that Sir Paul would not be at home till evening, I intended to postpone the interview till to-morrow; but, chancing to meet the Signorina Agnes, and feeling pretty sure that she would mention what passed between us in the shrubbery, and having also been seen by this signorina, whom you call Christina, and who is so like little Paolo's father, I resolved to defer the event no longer. I had dined on the meat I took from the larder—I will pay you for it, that you may not call me thief; the wine was my own, the silver-rimmed cup was once your son's—behold it! I had rested, and was dressing myself with care that I might present a respectable appearance before my son-in-law's family, when some one, to my great surprise, ventured into the haunted apartments, and not wishing to be announced prematurely, I did my best, by unearthly noises, to frighten the intruder; and, as soon as I knew that dinner was over, and Sir Paul in this room, I ventured to request an audience. That is all."

"All and enough with a vengeance," thought Walter.

Hilda held his hand tightly. Of course it was not to be thought of that Giuditta should leave the house at that hour, and Mrs. Maxwell and Christina were already consulting as to which of the guest chambers should be allotted to her, when she begged to be allowed to pass the night in her old quarters in the north wing. And, as she made a great point of still maintaining her privacy, and as Lady Braden was still in happy ignorance of the strange drama enacting in the library, it was agreed that no better arrangement could be arrived at, Mrs. Maxwell undertaking to serve this self-invited and formidable visitor with a good supper, and to add such comforts as could be hastily supplied to the bare and scanty garniture of the Tapestry Chamber.

CHAPTER XLII.

COUSIN WILLIAM.

"Past follies have present obligations, and old sins have long shadows."

"I HAVE decided to go with my father," said Walter, several days afterwards. "You do not mind, Hilda?"

"On the contrary, I should mind if you stayed; your proper place just now is with Sir Paul, and not with me. This affair has very much shaken him, and I can see he dreads the prospect of having to sift the strange business to the bottom; it will be like opening poor Paul's grave."

"Yes; we did hope that we had nothing worse than sad memories to cope with; we thought all that terrible past was dead and buried, except silently to ourselves. Now the world must know more of our family history than it has ever guessed at."

"Shall you let it come to a trial?"

"Certainly not, unless the other side force us to it. We shall deal justly and uprightly by this Giacinta and her child; but how do we know that our dealings may not be misconstrued by persons who are either impostors, or possessed with exaggerated notions of their own prerogatives?"

"I do not think Giuditta is an impostor; I am sure she believes, herself, in the claim she puts forward."

"She does; I have no doubt about it; but these Southerners are too apt to jump at conclusions, and then they do not know our English law. Most probably Giacinta married our poor brother in all good faith, and among her people she may hold her own as a lawfully married woman; but that queer certificate would be little better than waste paper in any English court of law."

"And English law would decide the matter, even though she be Italian?"

"Of course it would, for the inheritance in dispute is

English, and Giacinta's husband—granting that she really had one—was an English subject. I must confess I am extremely anxious to see this Giacinta; I shall know at once if she is a mere schemer. I wonder if that unfinished portrait of her is at all idealised! If not, Giacinta is, or was, a rarely beautiful creature, but not so stately as her mother. However, it will all turn on one point—whether the marriage was legal or not—and that the lawyers will be able to tell us. If Mr. Warwick says that Giacinta is a lawful Mrs. Braden—and he will not say it unless he be positive—we shall contest the point no further. I retire, and my small nephew steps into my shoes."

"But it will have to be proved that he is your nephew. Another child, not Paul's, might be brought forward. Some one will have to go to Rimesso, or wherever the child was born, and find out all about it. He cannot be more than four years old, nor much less than three."

"Hilda, if these Della Roccas prove their point, I shall be only a younger son, and I shall have only a share with the girls of my mother's fortune and what my father can save for me during his lifetime. At his death, nearly everything goes to the heir! The unentailed property has been almost dissipated by poor Paul's extravagance and—and dishonourable practices. Of course, my father was ready to sacrifice anything to save the family credit. Why, Hilda, those few strokes of the pen might have cost Paul his life had he lived in the last century. Forgery used to be a hanging matter."

"It did cost him his life, poor fellow; there is no doubt of that. He could not bear the shame and the misery he had brought upon himself; nor could he muster up courage to confess. I do not wonder when I think what a confession it must have been."

"Yes; my unfortunate brother paid a high price for his sins and follies, but it might have been a worse bargain still. He might have died a convict, and a few decades earlier he might have perished on the gallows. But I did not intend to dwell upon poor Paul's delinquencies, though it seems that once more we are to suffer for them. I only wondered if you quite understand the immense

difference between a mere Walter Braden and the heir of Bradenshope ? ”

“ I quite understand ; you will have hundreds when you expected to have thousands. Arnheim—dear, beautiful old Arnheim—will never be ours, and we shall be simply Mr. and Mrs. Braden to our dying day ; unless, indeed, you win a title of honour for yourself.”

“ Then you still intend to be my wife ? ”

“ Now I don’t understand ! You have done nothing to forfeit my affection, my esteem. If Ginditta had come and said that there had once been certain ties between you and Giacinta, I should certainly have demanded my freedom ; marriage or no marriage, I would never willingly have seen your face again. But here you are the victim of another’s sin and weakness ; you suffer for your brother’s folly—and it was worse than folly ! for either he deceived a pure girl by a sham ceremony, or else he deserted his wife, and died without acknowledging her existence.”

“ My opinion is that he went in for a kind of *morganatic* marriage. He was often applauding such unions, and regretting that they were not more fully recognised in this country. Go on, though ; I interrupted you.”

“ I was only going to say that I should for ever despise myself if for one moment I hesitated in my own course of action ; it was Walter Braden I loved from the beginning, and there was a time when I heartily wished he were not the heir of Bradenshope ! I have even wished it since our engagement, for it seemed to me that I was taking so much and giving so little ; what had I but myself to give ? ”

“ As if that were not worth more than a million of money ! Well ! you have your wish—at least I think you will have it, for something whispers me that Giacinta’s *bambino* is really the true heir. And you will not dislike being a poor man’s wife ? ”

“ I don’t say I would rather not have lived at Arnheim ; but I would rather live with you in the dullest London street, and go about in omnibuses, and bargain with the butcher, and hoard one black silk dress as my Sunday best, than live at Arnheim, with vassals and serfs at my

side, as the song says, without you. As for being poor, I don't care, except for you. A few hundreds a year will not be poverty to me, especially when I have taken a few more lessons from Aunt Dorothy and Aunt Rose. After all, perhaps, you will be quite as happy if you return to your profession as you would have been as a great landed proprietor and prospective baronet. The only thing that could make a real difference to me would be a difference in yourself. If—being comparatively poor—you felt it more prudent to remain a bachelor, I would not hesitate to release you from your promise."

"My darling Hilda ! poor or rich, I should be miserable without you. I despise old bachelors—stupid, selfish, cranky fellows, whom no one loves while they live nor regrets when they are dead ! I don't believe in bachelors ! It is not, I am convinced, that they are clinging to dead loves and sacred memories—except, perhaps, a few of them here and there—but rather that they are too cold to love anything as well as themselves, and prefer their own comfortable selfishness to sharing their possessions, or risking their beloved *dolce far niente*. And yet I don't know, if you threw me over, whether I might not degenerate into a wretched, fastidious, solitary, cynical bachelor ! "

"To save you from so terrible a fate I will *not* throw you over, whether you remain crown-prince or otherwise. There is just one other point to be considered ; as you are determined to marry without any regard to circumstances, ought I not to urge upon you the desirability of securing an heiress ? Don't you think now you *ought* to marry an heiress ? "

"You little torment ! You wicked girl ! It would serve you right if I said, 'Yes,' and immediately rode over to Temple Towerby, where there are *two* elderly heiresses, with complexions like their own gold, only waiting for a likely young man of good old family, and—great personal attractions !—ahem ! Only I don't like old maids *much* better than bachelors ; I prefer young maids who are not heiresses ; and still further, I prefer one young maid, who says she is as poor as a church mouse, though youth and health and beauty and a true,

loving heart are all her own. No, thank you, sweet ; I will not have any golden Miss Killmansegg ! I will have my bonny, saucy Hilda, and she, and no one else, shall plague me till my life's end, since she is so foolish as to take me 'for better for worse,' when it may be very much for the worse and very little for the better ! "

" Nay, dear, we will *make* it for the better ! Where there are love and truth, where there are a clear conscience and the fear of God, the better must prevail. So now we quite understand each other ; this troublesome baby Paolo, with the Sampiero blood in his veins, is not to trouble our future. Our engagement continues just the same as if Ginditta had remained in Corsica, and never had a handsome daughter."

" Since you are good enough to take a poor, younger son instead of the heir, I can only be too thankful. By the way, who were the Sampiero—or Sampierii, as our linguist, Christina, says ? I never heard of them, did you ? "

" Never, till yesterday ; and then Agnes and I shut ourselves up in the library and ransacked all the books about Corsica that we could find on the shelves ; and at last, in a 'Life of Napoleon Bonaparte,' we came upon the mention of a Sampiero, who seems to have been a Corsican hero, celebrated in the national songs, a deliverer of his country from a foreign yoke ; and, withal, something of a brigand—a sort of lesser Paoli, in fact ! There was also a reference to the family of Della Rocca, and a great deal about the *vendetta*, as an institution still existing, and until recently recognised and approved by nearly the entire community. A young girl there, it seems, frequently kills her lover if he deserts her, and she is applauded for so doing, and is generally acquitted by the authorities, or else very mildly punished as guilty of what is called 'justifiable homicide !' Perhaps Paul was obliged to marry Giacinta. She might have shot him had he refused."

" I would rather be shot, I fancy, than forced into wedding a woman whom I disliked, and perhaps despised."

" Take care, sir, then, how you flirt with ineligible

ladies! Flirtation must be an extremely dangerous amusement in Corsica. We found some curious ballads in another book, and one of them is about a fair lady, who shot her faithless lover, and was, in consequence, immortalised in song. She is described thus:—

“ ‘ She had the heart of a lion,
Of a tigress suckling.
She extended the arm with the pistol,
And at his head discharged it :
Saying, “ Soul unfaithful,
Your death is prepared.” ’

By the way, the original ballad is published by a Della Rocca!

“ An uncle of Giacinta’s, I dare say, and so a sort of connection of our own. Well! the system must have had one convenience; the judges and lawyers, if there were any, would never be troubled with intricate cases of ‘ breach of promise,’ since the ladies arranged their quarrels for themselves with such remarkable *sang-froid*. I wonder whether the admixture of Corsican blood will improve the Braden *physique and morale*! ”

“ Don’t joke about it; I think it is horrible. Why! if your father should be short-lived, this dreadful Giuditta may come and reign as queen-mother within these very walls. And of course the child will be brought up a bigoted Papist.”

“ I fancy we might prevent that, but I am not sure, and we could scarcely separate a young child from his mother. After all, we are, perhaps, disquieting ourselves in vain. The boy may have a claim upon us, and so may his mother, yet he may be no true heir of Bradenshope. The more I think of it, the more I am inclined to take the morganatic view of the question. Giacinta would be what is called ‘an honest woman’ among her own people; but the issue of such a marriage could never, according to English law, inherit family property. Paul knew what he was about, I imagine.”

“ Nevertheless, such a marriage must have been binding enough to shut him out from any other alliance. As Giacinta’s husband, he could never have formed other ties.

Do you not think that Father Cristoforo must have known there was something irregular in the business?"

"Most likely he did, and he must be interviewed by one of us as soon as convenient. Hilda, I have thought of a delightful plan—let you and I be married at once, and go to Italy together, and see what we can make of it. Two heads are better than one, and women are proverbially keener-sighted than men in matters of this kind. What do you say? I am sure my father and mother will approve."

"I say that it cannot be. Aunt Dorothy must not come home and find me a married woman. Besides, Uncle Arnison and Aunt Rose would not consent. They quite think that nothing ought to be settled till Aunt Dorothy returns to the Grey House."

"I wish she would make haste and come back, then; and I suppose you will say that you cannot come with us to London, even if my mother undertake to chaperone you?"

"Lady Braden is not fit for the journey, nor could she bear the excitement of being in town while the affair is in progress. Agnes means to accompany you, for Christina does not like to leave her mother, and Emily is out of the question just now. Some one ought to see Giacinta, and it should be one of the women of the family."

"At any rate, you will not defer the wedding beyond Midsummer? You promised, you know, that you would come to me with the June roses!"

"I promised, but conditionally; all depends on Aunt Dorothy."

"Suppose Aunt Dorothy should say that under the altered circumstances you shall not come at all?"

"She will not say anything of the kind. And even if she did—"

"Well?—even if she did, Hilda?"

"I should not be bound to obey her, for she is not my mother. I should wait and hope for her consent; but if a reasonable time elapsed, and it were still withheld, I should sorrowfully do without it. But all that is nonsense; we need not make an imaginary *bête noire* of poor Aunt Dorothy; she would be the last person to interfere

between lovers. I have heard her say that, except in extreme cases, even a parent has no right absolutely to forbid a marriage, seeing that lives have to be lived out when parents are in their graves, and that each generation, having arrived at maturity, must bear its own burden, run its own risks, and hold its own responsibilities."

"Mrs. Dorothy is a wise person, and I dare say she will behave admirably; but I wish she would make haste home from America."

Walter's wish was soon granted, for before the week was ended, and just as he and his father, with Agnes, were ready for the London journey, a telegram arrived at the Grey House to say that its mistress and her "adopted grandson" were already at Liverpool, and after a day's rest would proceed to Endlestone. The last words of the telegram, which was addressed to Mr. Barnes, were, "Forward immediately to Miss Capel, and communicate with Mrs. Arnison."

Accordingly, Nancy was despatched to Bradenshope, and Hilda knew that her long visit had at last come to an end. She was sorry that it should be just then, as Lady Braden and her daughters would be solitary after the departure of the travellers; still she felt it her duty to be found at the Grey House when Mrs. Dorothy returned, and Lady Braden and Christina, sadly as they would miss her at this juncture, did not endeavour to dissuade her. Emily, indeed, remarked that Hilda really belonged now to them, and she did not think so much hurry was needed; but her mother replied—"My dear, nothing is ever gained by the evasion of an immediate duty. Hilda is quite right; I should not think so well of her if she failed in her conduct towards her aunt."

So the last thing Walter did before he left home was to drive his betrothed to the Grey House, and their farewells took place there, instead of at Bradenshope.

Hilda found the two Barneses actively preparing for their mistress; fires were lighted in all the rooms, bed-linen was being duly aired, and there was a fine smell of baking and cooking from the kitchen. She felt very lonely when Walter left her, and she made haste to occupy herself, lest she should give way to a flood of tears, the traces of which

might seem ungrateful to her aunt. Nancy soon came to her assistance : " Mrs. Barnes has been and gone and done up the oak-room for the young master that is coming," she said. " Don't you think, Miss Hilda, it's much too big and dreary for a child ? I should be frightened now to sleep there ; I am sure I don't know why, for I never heard that it had a bad name, but it has such an *unked* look, like."

" Well," said Hilda, " it does look *unked*, if that means gloomy, and the reverse of snug ; but, Nancy, I do not think Master Rivers is quite a child—he must be a good big boy, I should say. Mrs. Dorothy did not mention his age, but he cannot be a child."

" Oh, dear, Miss Hilda, and I fancied him racing up and down the house in his knickerbockers, and making ever such a mess with his dirty boots. I wasn't sure he wouldn't want to be tubbed on a Saturday night, and I thought I'd ask the mistress to let me do it, because I'm fond of children, and used to a nursery before I came to Endlestone. Though how the mistress would ever reconcile herself to all the racket and muddle and caddle that a boy always makes, I couldn't think."

" I dare say he will make noise enough, and perhaps he will not be over-tidy. But he may be very quiet and grave, for he has gone through some sad experiences, I know ; and from what Aunt Dorothy has said of him, I should not be surprised to find him quite a manly youth, as old perhaps as Master Theodore."

" Any way, if he is not little, he'll have to go to school. I shouldn't wonder if he was sent to York, to the school where Master Arnison was before he left for foreign parts, and then this will be his home in the holidays."

" Very likely. Has Jacob had his orders for meeting the 5.30 train ? "

" Yes, Miss Capel, he left more than an hour ago, for it's a long step to Crabb's End ; I for one sha'n't be sorry when we have a station of our own, though some do say it will spoil the place. But I'm not so fond of so much quiet ; I like to see a little life, and I sometimes think one might as well be buried as live at the Grey House. And Mrs. Barker is coming back too ; and if we girls in the

kitchen ever do get up a little fun, she is sure to spoil it. I wish she had stopped in America!"

Hilda wisely made no reply; she had a similar feeling as regarded Barker, but it was not in the fitness of things to discuss one servant with another, and Barker's long and faithful service had made her a privileged person, in spite of her severe censorship and acrid temper. Hilda privately wondered how she and the Canadian boy would agree. Presently the chilly February day began to fade; the sun set in stormy clouds, the wind arose and howled mournfully through the empty house, and here and there snow-flakes wandered in the dusky air. It was a miserable day for a journey, and the travellers would have an uncomfortable time of it in crossing the great open moor that lay between the town of Endlestone and the railway station. As for Hilda herself, she felt dismal to the last degree, as she sat over the dining-room fire, listening to the wailing wind, and thinking, it must be confessed, not so much of those who were about to arrive, as of those who were leaving for London on the morrow.

"Bradenshope has spoiled me, I fear," she said to herself, as she looked round the room, so respectably furnished and so really comfortable, but so lacking in the colour and brightness that made the Bradenshope rooms so pleasant, even to a stranger; for Lady Braden was a woman who could always create a *home* about her, even out of the most unpromising materials. She disliked incongruities, and she saw at a glance how defective arrangements might be remedied. Every room at Bradenshope, save perhaps two or three of the huge state apartments, seemed made to be lived in, and one could well believe that an atmosphere of peace and love and gentle courtesies always pervaded them. "I am rather vexed with myself," continued Hilda; "I thought I had been stronger and wiser. The stream of my life has flowed so placidly of late that the first eddies weary and dispirit me; I suppose I was *too* content to enjoy my green pastures and still waters, forgetting the storms that lay behind, and the clouds that must erewhile gather in the front. And now the clouds are here, and very threatening they look! Oh, Paul, poor misguided Paul!"

I am very sorry for you, and I would not for the world speak harshly of your errors; but how could you, with such loving parents, such a happy home, and born to so fair an inheritance, make such utter shipwreck of your life, and leave behind you so sad a legacy of consequences? —fatal consequences, perhaps; for who knows how all this mystery will end? I am so grieved for those two, who are all but father and mother to me; and it is a terrible blow to Christina, and I think to Agnes. I think—I hope—Walter will not feel it so much—not on his own account, I mean; as younger son he will have enough, for his tastes are not extravagant, and I have fancied more than once that he regretted his prospects as a rising barrister. We shall live in London, of course, and Bradenshope will be our sweet holiday home. Arnheim, I suppose, must be left for the little heir. Ah! I cannot help feeling that a personal loss; I do so love Arnheim, and it was to be my very own home, and Walter and I have made so many plans about it together."

A few minutes longer, and carriage-wheels were heard; Jupiter and Juno came trotting up the avenue, their usual even pace quickened to something approaching a gallop at thoughts of their warm stable and the provender awaiting them; for the cold had increased since nightfall, and the snow was beginning to fall pretty thickly.

"We shall have a white, white world before morning; a Canadian welcome for thee, William!" Hilda heard Mrs. Dorothy saying, in the darkness, just outside the porch; for Jacob, counting on a week-old moon, had rashly dispensed with carriage-lamps. The next moment the mistress of the Grey House had crossed the threshold, and, beholding Hilda, took her into her arms in right motherly fashion, and kissed her, as she had never been kissed by Aunt Dorothy before.

"I knew thou wouldest be here, my child," she exclaimed, as she shook the snow-flakes from her large fur cloak. "I stopped at the Blue House, of course, and Rose and Ralph would fain have kept us for an hour, but I said I was sure thou wouldest be waiting at home; and that saucy puss, Octa, betted—actually betted!—a new silver thimble that thou wouldest be still with the folk at

Bradenshope. I'll make her buy me a brand new thimble at Croxton, to teach her not to make bets, the naughty child! And thou lookest very well, my dear; and it was very nice of thee to be here, to welcome the cross old woman! But where is William—thy new cousin, William Rivers? for he must be thy cousin, naturally, since he is my grandson, and thou my grand-niece. Never mind the luggage, William, my people will attend to that; come thou into the house, and to the fire, and be introduced to thy cousin, Hilda Capel, about whom we have so often talked."

"Yes, grannie! in one moment." And directly afterwards there was a great stamping of heavy boots, and punishing of mats in the outer hall, and then stepped forward a tall, handsome young man, full six feet high, and no stripling either. A young man with bright, curly hair, and a chestnut-brown beard, and laughing, sweet blue eyes, and a merry smile, and broad shoulders and stalwart limbs of his own.

"As fine a young fellow of seven-and-twenty as ever I see!" was Mr. Barnes' private verdict, confidentially delivered to his better half; "and he not properly British born."

And this was "Cousin William."

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE NEW EVANGELINE.

"All was ended now, the hope, and the fear, and the sorrow!
All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing;
All the dull, deep pain, and constant anguish of patience!
And, as she pressed once more the lifeless head to her bosom,
Meekly she bowed her own, and murmured, 'Father, I thank
Thee!'"

It was decided on all hands that Mrs. Dorothy was wonderfully improved by her travels; though as wise and sententious as ever, she was gentler and softer in her

moods, and she had certainly less confidence in her own opinions, and in her old time-honoured methods and maxims. Hilda was astonished to find how fond William Rivers was of the old lady, and still more surprised to discover in how very little awe he stood of "Grannie." To think that Mrs. Dorothy should have lived to be called "Grannie dear!" and "Grannikins," and "Mother Bunch," and twenty other ridiculous names, by a brawny six-foot Canadian, whom Mrs. Barker persisted in stigmatising as "that Yankee!"

Poor "Mrs. Verjuice" was *not* improved; "very much the other way," was the unanimous verdict of the kitchen-assembly, when it sat in solemn conclave after supper, the Abigail having retired to nurse her influenza-cold. She was more cantankerous than ever, and she took airs upon herself in virtue of her wonderful experience. Thankful as she declared herself to be at once more setting foot in Old England—the only country in all the world fit for decent people to inhabit!—she nevertheless found terrible fault with everything and everybody that fell in her way, and on more than one occasion actually came to high words with the inestimable Barnes, when he inquired if she had learned to prefer squash-pie to plum pudding, and hominy-cake to bread-and-butter. Poor old soul! she was that odious thing, a spoiled domestic, and though proud, after a fashion, of her Transatlantic adventures, she had really suffered many things by land and by water, and had failed to obtain her mistress's sympathy; she had even been told that she was little better than an encumbrance, and that the journey would have been more pleasantly accomplished without her.

The truth was that Mrs. Barker, having no fellow-servants on whom to vent her temper, had treated her mistress to certain little tantrums, the which for ever deposed her from the high favour she had hitherto enjoyed. She had tried to be insolent, but no one ever tried that twice with Mrs. Dorothy; she had threatened to be very ill and die in a foreign land, and had been cheerfully assured that she should be decently interred in a certain well-known cemetery, and her effects impartially divided among her heirs-at-law, her next of kin, whom she cor-

dially hated ; she had taken an intense dislike to both the Riverses, as having absorbed her mistress's attention, and all the jealousy which she had hitherto entertained towards Hilda was transferred to "the long-legged Yankee," to whom Mrs. Dorothy had taken such an unaccountable fancy. Jealousy was one of Mrs. Barker's unnamable peculiarities ; it was even said that she had shown a good deal of spite against Mrs. Jessie White and her squeaking brood, because they were more admired and petted than she approved.

Hilda was the person whom she selected as the recipient of her bewailings. "Ah, Miss Capel, ma'am, if I had only known what was before me," she declared with tears, "a team of horses shouldn't have dragged me on board that dreadful steamer. Such smells, and such noises, and such rolling up and down ! Never, to my dying-day, will my inside be right again ; and that's a sad consideration for a person of my age, for I don't pretend to be young, and I am twenty years older than I was the morning I said good-bye to Endlestone ! If you'd only felt it for one half-hour, Miss Capel, you would have prayed the Lord to take you ; I would not have cared if they had picked me up and tumbled me over that ship's side, and before I had been four days at sea I would have rewarded anybody that would have done it. Yes, there was plenty to eat and drink, but what are victuals when you can't abide the sight of them ! I did keep down a little hard biscuit and a glass or two of dry champagne, or else I should have starved, and landed in America a corpse. And then the railways there ; and the men all a-spitting ; and New York—I would not go about in it, as the mistress did, but I saw enough to show me that it was nothing better than a den of thieves and a sink of iniquity—a regular bad Babylon, such as the Bible tells us shall be destroyed, and a very good thing, too ! "

"But," urged Hilda, "I have always heard that New York is a very fine city, and I know there are many excellent people in it."

"Never believe what books and travellers say, Miss Capel ! It's big and it's bustling, and the folks are impudent, that's all ; but give me old York in the old

country ! I wouldn't go to America again, no ! nor to no foreign parts, for a million of money and a crown of diamonds ! As for Canada, the more I saw of it the worse I liked it ; and oh ! Miss Capel, don't talk of English *cold* again ! The mistress declared she liked it, for it was a dry, bracing cold, and the air was so clear and bright, when it wasn't snowing ; but I thought it was dreadful, enough to nip your nose off. And everything froze—almost the pot on the fire, and the blood in your veins. I thought when we got to Riversdale, as Mr. Rivers' estate is called, that we should find some comfort ; but bless you, ma'am, them Americans don't know what comfort is ! Such a big, ramshackle place, I never saw, and such ways of going on, and the servants as stuck-up as possible, and thinking nothing of the English. Why ! one of the men actually called me 'goody' to my face. And another asked me if I had come to get a Canadian sweetheart ; and a third, one of the impudentest, most conceitedest fellows I ever did set eyes upon, nudged me, so that I spilled my coffee all over my second-best damask-silk apron—the one with bugle fringe, you know, Miss Capel—and says he, 'Is it a case of Barkis is willin'?' And some of them tittered like fools, as they was ! And I up, and made answer—' My name is Barker, not Barkis, and I take it as a liberty when I'm called out of my name, which is a thing I never permit.' And oh, how they laughed—what at I'm sure I don't know ; and when I told the mistress and Mr. William, if they didn't laugh, too ; and ever since that foolish young man has been asking me if I'm 'willin' ! ' And there was a lot of carts at Riversdale ; and one day they got me into the sheds, and there was written on every cart, in big letters, '*Barkis is willin'*'. That was in white chalk ; in red chalk there was wrote here and there, 'but nobody else ain't ! ' And after that I was always being called 'Barkis.' And one idiot says—'Air yew Barkis, or air yew Peggotty ?' And says I, sharp enough, 'I never answer fools ! And I think this here country of yours is full of nothing else.' Then the old gentleman died, and they were quiet for a bit, and after a while we went to a place called Toronto, and we saw lakes like seas for bigness, and mountains and rivers

and prairies—where the prairie-hens come from, I suppose; but all of them wretchedly cold and stupid, and the people—men and women, too—*hateful!* and such horrid bumptious children as you never saw. Bless you, a four-year-old in petticoats thinks nothing of teaching you how to speak your own English language. I thought we should never get away, for the mistress and Mr. William had heaps of business, and the mistress was for seeing all she could see; I had half a mind to tell her she had far better be thinking of her latter end and of the dangers of the briny deep as lay before her; but I didn't."

"I think it is quite as well you did not, Barker. Mrs. Dorothy does not permit liberties, as you know."

"Mrs. Dorothy, ma'am, ain't what she used to be. There was a time when I might speak faithfully to her, and she'd listen, as meek as milk; but now it's 'Barker, I don't want to hear that!' or, 'That will do, Barker; you can go.' And one day I overheard that Yankee saying, 'I'll tell you what, grannie, we'll superannuate the old girl when we get home.' And I know he meant me, and I know 'superannuate' means something disrespectful. I didn't think to come to be mocked at in my declining days, and I wouldn't have believed it of the mistress, that she'd turn out so crusty, and behave so unhandsome. But there! it don't matter; I'm not long for this world—America has about done for me; it's taken all the spirit out of me, and I shall soon be removed to a more congenial spere, where I shall find the reward of a long life of virtues. I bought a sweet little poetry-book at a place called Brooklyn, Miss Capel, and there was one poem that made me shed tears; it was called 'The Grave.' I've read it over and over till I know it by heart, almost. It begins—

"There is a calm for those who weep,
A rest for weary pilgrims found,
They softly lie and sweetly sleep,
Low in the ground."

It's very touching, isn't it, when you feel such a weary pilgrim? The poem is not all like that, though; some of the verses are not nearly so soothing. I'll lend it to you, Miss Capel."

"Thank you, Barker, but I know it very well, and I am not quite sure that it means exactly what you think. However, I hope, now you are at home again, you will soon feel better and happier. You are a little thinner, I fancy, but you do not look any the worse for your two voyages, and your long railway journeys."

"Oh! Miss Capel, I'm not one to show my inward feelings, but I know how I feel, and I know I sha'n't be spared much longer. No unkindness will trouble me much more. I am going to make a new will, and I don't see what better I can do with my little property than leave it all to you, Miss Capel. You're a nice, kind-hearted young lady, and you didn't ought to be put aside for impudent Yankees, that are no more Capels than I am."

Hilda gravely thanked Barker, but declined the testimentary favours. It was all she could do not to hurt the poor old woman's feelings by laughing at these fresh *post-mortem* arrangements, for Barker was notoriously fond of making wills and codicils, and the reversion of her "little property" had been settled and unsettled again and again, at least a dozen times. How many last wills and testaments she had executed, nobody ever knew. If she died "intestate," as she frequently remarked, the "little property" would go to certain nephews and nieces; "and them I can't abide," she added; "they're not of my way of thinking. I've a great mind to leave all I've got to the County Lunatic Asylum."

Hilda thought the nephews and nieces, even though they were not of their aunt's "way of thinking," had decidedly the first claim; but the Lunatic Asylum could inherit in default of lawful heirs.

And now the Grey House was bright as it had not been for many and many a day. William Rivers was the life of the place. He at once made friends with all the pigs; he interviewed the cows; he established amicable relations with the turkey-cock, who was still Hilda's most secret dread, and he was evidently the cynosure of the whole poultry yard. The dogs all ran after him, the horses poked their noses into his hand, the cats perched themselves on his knee, or rubbed against his legs, and the

pigeons alighted on his shoulders as often as he came near the dovecot. He was soon on speaking terms with every man, woman, and child in the neighbourhood ; he patted the little girls' heads, and chucked the small lads under the chin, and won golden opinions from all the mothers. And the men said, "He knew a thing or two, did that Canadian chap;" and Barnes, after a little stiffness, and slightly influenced, perhaps, by Mrs. Barker, was perforce obliged to acknowledge that "Mr. William was a rare farmer, and knew the land as if he'd been born on it, and could take the exact value of the stock as if he'd knowed it all his life."

And one day, several weeks after their arrival—when Mrs. Dorothy said, "Barnes, you will still be my factotum and trusty servant, but you will go to Mr. Rivers for orders, and consider him as chief authority on the farm. I mean to rest now, and content myself with the superintendence of my indoor affairs, and I can visit the sick, and make myself generally useful, while Mr. Rivers manages the estate"—Barnes replied, "Well, ma'am, and I don't object, for he's a gentleman, every inch, and there are a good many inches of him, too! And he understands farming wonderful, nor does he think he demeans hisself by coming to me, when he don't quite understand our English agriculture. I've often wanted to go in for high-farming, though at first I can't say as how I did favour them steam-kettles in the fields. And the men will mind him, you'll see; he's one that will have his own way when he's once made up his mind that it's the right way, and he'll be a kind master, and won't never grind the faces of the poor, which is forbidden in the Scriptures. But he'll want a fair day's work for a fair day's wage, and he'll have it, too, or know the reason why! He won't put up with tricks nor laziness, and he'll set his countenance dead against the drink, and all sorts of bad language. I'm only sorry he ain't a downright Englishman."

"He is next to it, Barnes, for he has always been a British subject, and half the blood in his veins is pure English. The Riverses are an old Yorkshire family, you know; and Mr. William is a true Rivers, and his mother,

curiously enough, was born not twenty miles from Endlestone."

"I've heard say, many a time, that Canada isn't exactly America."

"It is America, certainly, Barnes; but it is not part of the United States, any more than France is part of Russia. America is a big place, it's more than half the world, and there are all sorts of peoples in it, and different races, and opposing religions, and every kind of climate, from the frozen regions where Sir John Franklin and his company perished, to the tropical heat that only the natives can endure."

"Yes, ma'am, I know! Me and my old woman got a map book when you went away, just to see where you really were, for at first it was all one to us as if you'd gone to the moon! And the schoolmaster at Endleside, he explained things to us, and we got to know a lot. If I was a young man, I'd go in for learning—I would! Oh! to read about them American rivers, and them lakes, and the big trees in California, and the dark cold winter in the Fur-country, and the plantations in Carolina, and the fever at New Orleans, and the gold mines of Peru, and the miles and miles of railway everywhere, and the volcanoes, and the earthquakes, and the swamps, and the prairies, and our choicest hothouse flowers and fruits growing wild in the woods and hedges out-of-doors—it's *stu—pendious*—that's what it is, and nothing less, ma'am!"

"You seem to have been reading quite extensively this winter, Barnes! We must come to you for information, I see, when we are at fault; that's clear."

"No, no, ma'am; it's only just the bare outside of things that I know; the skimmings of American geography, I call it. But I got interested, and the more I knew the more I wanted to know; and I told Mrs. Arnison, and she lent me some delightful books, and some large maps, and explained all about latitude and longitude, which I couldn't exactly make out from the schoolmaster's explanation; I'm not sure he rightly understood himself. I wish I'd had the luck to go with you; I want now to see America with my own eyes—a little piece of it, that is. I wouldn't have grumbled like that silly Barker, who

can't see a speck of good out of her own country, or, for the matter of that, in anybody but herself ! If Mr. Rivers should ever want a little business done for him in Canada, or in New York, I'm his man."

And so the new order of things was quietly established at the Grey House, and Mr. Rivers became the popular man of the neighbourhood. Hilda and he got on together delightfully ; she willingly accepted him as a relation, and very soon found herself talking confidentially to him about her past and present life, and upon many subjects, national, social, political, and theological.

"Walter will be charmed with him," she said one day to Mrs. Dorothy. "I know they will be great friends. William has just the keen, practical mind and the bright, genial temperament that he so much admires ; and William cannot fail to be charmed with Walter."

"I'll tell thee what, Niece Hilda, thou didst a fine stroke of business for thyself, while I was away in Canada ! All sorts of things seem to have happened while I was absent. Dost thou guess, I was a little afraid thou mightest set thyself against William as an interloper ? "

"You know, I thought, before I saw him, that he was only a great boy—such another as Theodore Arnison, perhaps, but certainly not a man grown. Most certainly not such a man as he turns out to be—so good, so pleasant, so superior in every way."

"If thou hadst not been already engaged, I think I should have been tempted to try my hand at a little match-making. Thou and he would have made a fine couple, and reigned happily at the Grey House when I was laid low."

"It is a good thing, then, that I am engaged, Auntie Dorothy, for I think match-making never prospers."

"The truth is," said Mrs. Dorothy, rubbing her nose, "that I was, for awhile, not quite easy in my mind. I have never said I would leave the Grey House and its lands to thee—indeed, I had always led thee to believe to the contrary. But still, I felt that thou hadst a claim, and a strong one ; for thou art of my own blood, and we Capels have always held that 'blood is thicker than water,' as the old Scotch proverb puts it. And I had found out

that thou wast a good girl, and would do justice to a fair inheritance. So when I had said that William should be my heir, I felt pricked in my conscience, and I wished that he should be benefited, and thou none the worse ; and it came into my head that you two might become man and wife, and so set all quite straight. Then came news of thy engagement to Walter Braden, and I said to myself, ‘What is done is done, and all is for the best, Dorothy Capel !’ As lady of Bradenshope and Arnheim, thou wouldst have all that heart could wish ; but should this wretched little Paolo and his mother make good their claim, thou wilt be—a comparatively poor man’s wife.”

“ Dear aunt, do not trouble about that. We shall not be really poor, only comparatively so ; but for Walter’s sake and his parents—for they naturally dislike the idea of an Italian heir—and that I do love Arnheim, I should not care a jot. Luckily for me, I loved the man and not the heir, and so I am content. Why, auntie ! I would marry Walter, and think myself happy, if we had to work for mere bread and cheese, and a bare, decent shelter.”

“ Bless thee, child, thou art quite right ; thou art a true woman in spite of thy worldly bringing-up. That is the only right union between man and woman, the one *sacred* union which God approves. My life has been a tangled skein, Hilda, and now it has run out smooth, and I understand much which, till very recently, was a vexatious puzzle. Let me speak to thee freely, child—the same sentiments and a strong fellow-feeling bring rich and poor, old and young, gentle and simple, together. I will tell thee—I did not own it to myself—I believe I may say I did not know it—but I had a grudge against thee ! Yes, I had ; I am sure of it now. Forgive me, Hilda ! I tried to do my duty by thee, but I could not love thee as my own, because thou wast thy father’s daughter—and thy father had been my cruel, relentless foe. He had sundered me and the love of my life ; he had taken from me my heart’s treasure ; he had made me a solitary woman ; he had stepped into my paradise, and been there as the deadly, fabled upas-tree. And I looked at thee, and thou wast his very flesh and blood !—and I could not take thee to my bosom, and be to thee all I might have been.”

"I do not wonder ! I know now all that my father did. Aunt, I think you did your duty bravely; I wonder, though, if I should have been as good ? It makes all the difference when one knows what true love is—and I do know now, thank God."

"My dear, all is forgiven now. It came right at last, you see. It was God's will that I should live a solitary life, that I should never know the bliss of wedded love nor the delight of children at my knee. But in His great mercy He gave me the sweetness of those last days ; and how sweet they were only I, and he who is gone, and the dear Lord Himself, can ever know ! And all was explained, my dear ; heart to heart was laid bare, as before God ; and though earthly union was impossible, our souls became one ; we married each other for ever and ever, our hands stretched across the grave. And he is gone before, and in a little while I shall go to him. And, Hilda, I am very happy."

"I am so glad. I think you must have felt like 'Evangeline.'"

"That I did ! I had not been seeking my lover all those years as she did, but my heart had never ceased yearning over him, and I thought, especially as I grew older, that if I could but see his face, and clasp his hand once, only in friendship, only for the old love's sake, I should be content—ay, more than content—to die. And when at last we met—and greater blessings than Evangeline's were ours, for we spent days and weeks together in full and perfect communion of heart and soul—I could only repeat her words, 'Father, I thank Thee.' So now all repining has vanished, every harsh feeling has died away. But I must just say this—though William will be lord of the manor of High Endlestone when I am gone, just as if his father had been my own son, there will be something left for you ; for Mr. Rivers, whom I thought so poor, was, after all, tolerably wealthy. And William brings over with him to this country a very handsome fortune of his own. He will for the future be at all expenses for the estate ; his money, not mine, will be invested in the farming processes, and what I can save, and all that I have laid by already—a nice little sum, my dear !—shall be yours."

"That is very, *very* good of you, auntie; but I hope it will be many years before there is any question of inheritance. And if Walter's rights are sustained, we shall not want anything; and the money and the land had better go together."

"Well, child! that will be as things turn out. And if Paul Braden were not dead and buried, I should scarcely find any terms too severe in which to stigmatise his unworthy conduct. Oh dear! Oh dear! It is enough to make one tremble to think how our evil deeds live after us, and bear bitter fruit when we are dust and ashes."

CHAPTER XLIV.

GIACINTA.

"She was Italy's daughter,
I knew it by her eye."

I NEED scarcely say that Hilda heard regularly from Walter, reporting such progress as had been achieved—a progress which scarcely deserved the name, inasmuch as it was only just one remove from standing still, and sometimes hardly that. Mr. Warwick had at first received the news with amazement and incredulity; he had almost pooh-poohed it, and pronounced it a bare-faced conspiracy of the women with whom the late Mr. Braden had been so unfortunate as to entangle himself. It was so easy to assume a foreign marriage, and bring forward a child of the proper age, and the Bradenshope estates were well worth intriguing for! And it was not at all impossible that it was a plot of the *priests*, who would be delighted to secure a Roman Catholic heir for the succession! This was a new light to Sir Paul, but he was not much inclined to dwell upon it. His own convictions lay in the same

direction as Walter's. Paul not daring, and perhaps not wishing, to establish illicit relations with the daughter of so formidable a personage, had gone through a certain religious ceremony, which would be equivalent to a morganatic marriage. It would be legal in Italy, and binding everywhere; but the children of the union, if any, would not be accounted legitimate in England, and, of course, would have no part in the Bradenshope inheritance.

And this also was the view which Mr. Warwick himself took, when he had seen and conversed with Giuditta, and had carefully studied and compared the documents she had presented. "That your deceased son wrote these letters there cannot be a reasonable doubt," he said to the baronet; "and in them, you see, he acknowledges the girl to be his wife. The tone, too, throughout is rather that of a husband than a lover. Nor, I think, are we wrong in assuming that he went with this girl to church, and, in the presence of witnesses, took her for his wedded wife, according to the form and ritual of the Church of Rome; that he received the priestly benediction, and was accounted by all the young woman's friends and relations her lawful husband."

"In that case, I really do not see what we have to go upon. A legal marriage involves a legal issue."

"Not necessarily. An Italian marriage, solemnised by a Romish priest, is a very different thing from an English marriage, even though it be contracted only in a registrar's office. The civil marriage, you know, is as binding as the august ceremonial performed by an archbishop in a cathedral, and nothing but death or the Divorce Court can reverse it; but this affair at Rimesso—I am sure I have no idea where the place is!—is open to several objections. Mr. Braden had never, even on his reputed wife's showing, been received into the communion of the Church of Rome, and he was married in his Christian name *only*. That, it seems to me, settles the matter. A marriage-certificate in which the name of Braden in no way appears can scarcely be conclusive in any of our courts of law."

"And yet, Giovanni Paolo, or John Paul, really was my son. I feel assured of it."

"And so do I. But it would be difficult to prove it; so difficult, as to be next to impossible."

"I don't know that, Mr. Warwick. Giuditta, without any assistance, found out that her son-in-law, John Paul, and my son, Paul Braden, of Bradenshope, were identical. She will stick to that, you may depend upon it."

"And so she may, but an inch of proof is worth a mile of assertion. My dear Sir Paul, you may acknowledge this child Paolo as your grandson, and you may receive his mother as your daughter, and account her a virtuous woman, and yet you cannot make the boy your heir. The marriage was good enough, as far as it went; but it did not go far enough. It secured Giacinta in her conjugal rights, and that was all. It was virtually what we do not acknowledge in England, though in high life it did, and does, exist—a morganatic marriage, which includes all rights but those of succession. It is said there are Royal personages in England at this hour so bound. It may or may not be. I would not presume to affirm it. But if it be—and that it has been we know—the children of these left-handed unions, though not exactly under the ban of illegitimacy, are never recognised as of the blood-royal. They have no more title to the succession than you or I, though they may, of course, inherit private property."

"Private, but not entailed?"

"Not *entailed*. If your son Paul had devised his private property to this child, he must, of course, have inherited it; and if your property were derived from business, or simple inheritance, and unentailed, it would be a simple matter of conscience as to the boy's rights. But lawful heir of Bradenshope, and sixth baronet in succession, you cannot make him, if you would! I am positive that the present Mr. Braden is your only true heir, and to no one else, while he lives, can the inheritance descend. And should he unhappily die childless, Bradenshope would go to your cousin, Damian Braden, the parson, and not to the offspring of Paul's Italian marriage."

"You say you are positive?"

"I do say so. I have consulted the best authorities, and all agree with me. The child of such a marriage can never touch the entailed estates, or make pretensions to

the title. Only by courtesy could he be called a Braden. Nevertheless, the position is vexatious enough, for the other side will never rest till the question is decided in open Court. And then, heaven knows what secrets may be pried into, what painful revelations must perchance be made! Bless me! there are fellows, warranted to pull their clients through, who, rather than lose a verdict, will drag the best names in the country into the mire, and bespatter the most sacred memories. We must try for a compromise."

"Will not that seem like a confession of weakness?"

"If it seems it will not be so. We only want to keep the business out of Court for the sake of everybody concerned. If it once come to a trial, there can be no doubt about the result; but, then, a public trial is what you shrink from."

"Can you wonder?"

"No, indeed. Who likes their private family affairs published to all the world? And this case is an exceptional one. Forgive me, if I refer to what must be most painful; but it is highly probable, almost certain, that those passages of your late son's career, which all his friends must wish buried in oblivion, will be brought to light, and exposed in all their ugliness to an uncharitable public if the case come into Court. Of course, there have been whispers, rumours, surmises, and harsh judgments have been pronounced; but no one has dared to say openly that the poor young man was a suicide, or that he had otherwise broken his country's laws, and the chatter which necessarily arose at the time has long since died away. But *everything* will be turned over if once it gets into legal hands, and it will be impossible to conceal or to soften down the terrible facts which really did occur. I am grieved to pain you so much, Sir Paul, but as your friend and faithful counsellor, I felt bound to warn you of the results of an open trial."

"It was that I dreaded. I knew what must be if the case were publicly disputed; and yet, what can be done? I cannot yield the point, the law would not permit it; even if Walter and I were willing to sacrifice everything to the family honour and to our own feelings, it might not be."

"It might not. If Mr. Braden should attempt to join you in cutting off the entail, there are innumerable obstacles and difficulties in the way. A dozen complications would at once arise, and the public tongue would be instantly let loose. Indeed, I doubt if the thing could be done at all; the old Arnheim entail is one of the strictest I ever met with. No; we must persuade the women—Mesdames Giuditta and Giacinta. You, or I—or both of us, rather—must first make sure of our premises, and satisfy ourselves that the child really is your grandson, and that there actually was a marriage at Rimezzo; and then we must go to the ladies with—'all claims acknowledged, all rights guaranteed, *save those of succession.*'"

"They will never yield—at least, Giuditta will not; that woman has a will of iron, and a most persistent courage. She is not a Sampiero for nothing. As for Giacinta, I should say, from what I can gather, that she is altogether made of softer stuff, and is open to persuasion; but she is evidently under her mother's sway."

"It is with Giacinta that your action must lie. Have you seen her?"

"Not yet. Agnes and I intended seeing her the other day, and we actually went to Leicester Square for the purpose, and found that she had left, the place being too noisy, and the air not suiting her child. It was only yesterday that we traced her to respectable, though rather Bohemian, lodgings, in the neighbourhood of Fitzroy Square. I thought it best to defer the visit till after I had had a talk with you, and learnt your opinion of the documents."

"I would see her at once—to-morrow, if I were you. She will open her heart to poor Paul's father and to Miss Agnes, as she never would to a mere man of business. If her mother were happily absent, you would have the better chance with her, and you would more easily get at her own real opinion. And remember it is Mrs. Giacinta who must appear as plaintiff on behalf of her child, and not Mrs. Giuditta, who can be nothing more than a witness."

"I will take your advice. Agnes and I will go to Fitzroy Square to-morrow, and I only hope we may

be so fortunate as to find Madame Giuditta 'not at home.'

And on the morrow Sir Paul and Agnes did pay the proposed visit. And the better to describe what passed, and the impressions which both of them received, I shall here give, in full, Agnes' letter to Christina—a letter which she carried with her to the Grey House, and there read aloud to Hilda and Mrs. Dorothy. Agnes wrote—

"At last, Chrissie, we have seen Giacinta and little Paul—papa and I! We had no small difficulty in finding them, for we could not at first ascertain their correct address from the people at the boarding-house in Leicester Square; they could only tell us that Madame *Braden*—pronounced Brahdan—had found the neighbourhood too noisy, and had moved into quieter apartments—into private lodgings, in fact. We also learnt that the close London air and the chilly temperature did not suit the child, who was sadly ailing when he was taken away by his mother and grandmother—to Fitzroy Square, mine host believed, but he could not be certain. He was very polite, and evidently full of regret that he could not give us the exact information we required. He spoke most respectfully of Madame Brahdan, who was in England on a matter of family business, and, as it appeared to him, not quite with her own will. He felt sure he could obtain Madame's present address; and would we honour him by calling again, or should he send to us? We said we could call again at his house in three days, which we did, and received precise directions, without which we might have searched long enough; for the lodgings are not in Fitzroy Square itself, but in an obscure street at some little distance from it.

"Well, Chrissie, we found the house, and rang the bell. A fat Italian woman answered the door, and assured us that *Mrs. Braden*, for whom we asked, was 'at home'; and she pointed up the stairs, but did not offer to escort us any further. So we did the best we could, and ascended on a voyage of discovery. There was nothing left for it but to knock at all the doors till we came to Giacinta's rooms. Happily, we were at once successful, for Giacinta occupies what we should call the drawing-room

apartments, on the first landing. We knocked, and a gentle voice said, '*Entrate!*' and immediately afterwards, '*Come in!*' We entered ; how my heart did beat !

"Oh, Chrissie ! there sat, on a low chair, with a little boy in her arms, the most lovely creature I ever saw. She seemed a mere girl, and indeed she is now barely one-and-twenty, and looks much younger. She was very simply dressed in black, with little white ruffles at neck and wrists, and her beautiful hair was just wound round a classically-shaped head, and fastened behind with a large coral comb. She has exquisite features, a perfect mouth and delicate chin, a pure olive complexion—scarcely darker than your own—a low, broad forehead, nearly straight brows, and soft, dark, pathetic eyes. She looked a little frightened at first, when she knew who we were, and she burst into tears, and then she rose—such a slender, graceful figure she is!—and clasped papa's hands to her bosom, and kissed them tenderly. 'Sit down, my dear,' said papa, in his own kind, most fatherly way, 'do not be afraid of me ; I am your poor Paul's father, and this young lady is his sister Agnes, of whom you must have heard.'

"She looked at me with great shining eyes, and did not speak, and then she sank back into her chair, taking up the child, whom she had hastily set down. Giuditta was there, I must tell you, but she seemed at first rather inclined to listen than to join in the conversation. She looks quite another person out of her masquerading attire ; she, too, wore a plain dark winter-dress, but her heavy earrings were in her ears, and that wonderful brooch of hers, with the red stones, clasped a large collar of some curious foreign and, I should say, *antique* lace. 'And this is your boy ?' said papa, trying to make friends with the poor little fellow, who hid his face in his mother's bosom. Christina ! he is the living image of our poor Paul—he is just what Paul must have been at his age ; he might have sat for that picture that used to be in mamma's dressing-room—you remember a portrait of Paul, in a white frock, or tunic, with a red sash, and fat, round arms, and dimpled knees, and he is sitting under the old oak, near the lily pond, with his little dog Favo asleep at his feet ?

Well ! that picture, done so many years ago, might pass for a likeness of *this* little Paul if only he wore a white dress, and looked healthier.

"In answer to papa, Giacinta said, 'This is my Paolo ; is he not like his father ?' And the person most prejudiced against them both must have been constrained to acknowledge that he was. And then Giacinta added, blushing deeply, 'Indeed, he is your grandchild !' Papa replied that he had very little doubt of that, and I could see that it was as much as he could do to maintain his composure ; he said afterwards, it was just like having his own little lad back again—Paul as he was, when Walter was a baby in arms. Papa was evidently very much perplexed as to what he should say next, and while he hesitated, Giuditta took up her parable, and observed that now he must be convinced that she had intended no imposture, and that the question must be settled. She was going on rather volubly, partly in Italian, partly in English, when her daughter stopped her, 'That is enough, mother ; do not let us waste our breath in words. Sir Paul Braden has other questions to ask ; he wishes to know what right I have to assume his name, and why I make claims upon him, in the name of my son, his grandchild.'

"Then said papa, 'Tell me the whole story, my dear, from your first meeting with Paul, if it does not give you too much pain.' And she replied, very quietly, 'That is what I wish to do ; I ask nothing better than to speak the truth to my husband's father, for he *was* my husband, sir, in the eyes of God and of His Church, and according to our own Italian law ; but I know now what I did not know till the other day, that the English law does not accept the marriage as a good one because Paul was, outwardly, at least, a Protestant, and also because he called himself Giovanni Paolo, or John Paul, all through the ceremony. He signed his name in the great book 'Giovanni Paolo,' and I signed mine 'Giacinta Maria Sampauro della Rocca.' I had then never heard the name of Braden ; and it was not till a stranger who had seen us together, and knew who Paul really was, told me certain things, that I suspected I had wedded an English lord,

and not a poor wandering artist. Even then I did not know the name, but I found it afterwards in an English book, which, with some others, English and French, were left with me. See ! this is it.'

"It was a volume of Shakspere, a pocket edition, and the missing volume of that set, bound in dark red morocco, which is at this moment on your own book-shelves at home—the very volume about which Hilda inquired one day, saying what a pity it was that the set should be imperfect. There it was, however, with Paul's full name on the fly-leaf in pencil, and our own crest stamped on the title-page. She showed us also Paul's miniature, painted by himself, on ivory, and set in exquisite filagree gold, and she had other relics of him, though nothing else of any value. And then, as if she had not had strength enough before, she began the story : how Paul had come to her aunt's cottage at Rimesso one vintage feast, and had been hospitably received, how he had danced with her and asked permission to paint her, how he had stayed on and on at Rimesso, making pictures, and sometimes selling them in the nearest towns. How they had come to love each other—she was only between fifteen and sixteen, poor child!—and how, when her mother heard of the intimacy, she came and took her away first to Calandrina, and afterwards to Sta. Lucia di Tallano, and forbade her, under pain of her curse, ever to see the English artist's face again !

"But," she continued, "I was undutiful. I would not make any promises ; and fearing lest I should be shut up in the convent near at hand, I fled to Rimesso, where, in the presence of my father's kinsfolk, I married Giovanni Paolo, as we always called him, and went with him to Rome, where he was to paint a great picture that would make his fortune. I wanted to stay at Rimesso, where my people were, my Aunt Assunta, my Uncle Giuseppe, and all my cousins. But he was tired of the place, he said, it was so very dull ; and truly it was not an entertaining residence for a lively young man, used to change and to congenial society. We lived some time in Rome ; then we travelled to other cities—Florence, Venice, Ravenna ! And—and before I had been married quite one

year, I found out that my husband was tired of me. He began to talk of urgent business in England; and one morning he went out, just as usual, and did not come back. I never saw him again, and I only heard once from him. He said it might be some months before he returned, and he advised me to go to Rimesso, or, better still, to make it up with my mother. I decided on the latter alternative—that was in the late spring; and in the autumn my little Paolo was born, and I tried to console myself with my own baby at my breast. Months afterwards came the stranger gentleman—it was mid-winter, I recollect, for it was just after the Feast of the Epiphany—and then I learned many things about my husband, and last of all that he was *dead!* And my mother was full of the child's rights, and insisted upon it that my Paul was really a great noble, and that his boy, born in lawful wedlock, must be his heir. And it seemed so to me, for I never doubted the legality of my marriage at Rimesso, and though I would rather have remained quietly in my own station of life, I felt that I ought not to stand in the little one's light. So when my mother came back from England, just before the Feast of San Martino, and told me she had found Paul's father—Sir Paul Braden, of Bradenshope—and that my boy's uncle was called the heir—no one knowing that the child lived—I could only obey her, when she desired me to prepare to accompany her to London, and assert little Paolo's claims. But now I know what those claims are—my marriage *was* a good one, as far as I am concerned; for no one can speak lightly of me. I was Paul's own wedded wife, and he could never have married any other woman while I lived. But the English law of succession will not receive our child as his father's true heir. Is it not so?

"Then papa very kindly told her that it was precisely as she had said, that *he* could not alter the law, nor render the little boy legitimate, so as to make him next in the entail. In fact, he could not come into the entail at all; for if Walter died childless, the title and the estates must go to our cousin Damian Braden, whom we do not love. Ginditta was very angry, and declared that the case should be tried in open day, for the marriage was either

legal or it was illegal; and if Giacinta were Paul's lawful wife, as papa seemed to admit, little Paolo *must* be his legitimate son, and consequent heir of Bradenshope! And when Giacinta would have quieted her she became furious, so that we were glad to take our departure. But for this Giuditta, we might have Giacinta with us, perhaps, for I am sure we all should love her. As for the child, I think he will be no trouble long to any one, for he is surely very ill. He never was very strong, but he might have lived to be a man had he not been brought to England. The journey and the change of climate were too much for him. The doctor who was called in said the keen air was killing him, although he was kept in one room, and as far as possible in one temperature; the cold has fastened on his lungs, and he cannot be taken back to Italy as the journey would be too much for him in his present state, even if the weather became much warmer. It has been either chilly or foggy, or else freezing, ever since he was brought to London. I asked if he could not be taken to Bradenshope for pure air and all the nursing we could give him; but the doctor said he must not be moved, and he must be kept as quiet as possible till the inflammation is subdued. Everything depended on quiet and an even temperature! I am afraid his grandmother can do him little good, chattering away as she does, and talking about his rights—poor baby!—till he is frightened, his mother says. It is a sad affair altogether; Giacinta has suffered much, and will suffer still more if, as I fear he will, the child should die. And he seems to be paying the price of his father's errors; I am more and more convinced that our brother never intended to own his marriage, nor did he in the least imagine that it would ever be discovered, or that Giovanni Paolo would ever be identified with John Paul Braden, of Bradenshope.

"Giacinta is very religious, but she is, of course, a Roman Catholic, and she is superstitious, I fancy, as most of her countrywomen are. She speaks English remarkably well; she learned it when a child, from an English lady who lived for several years in her neighbourhood, and took great pains with her education. For

the last year or two she has studied the language, she says, for her boy's sake, and he lisps very prettily in his father's tongue, though of course he speaks more readily in Italian.

"And now I have told you all that I have to tell at present. There will be *no trial* we may confidently hope, as Giacinta refuses to take the necessary steps; and though she is very gentle, I can see that she has plenty of firmness, and will neither be scolded nor coaxed into submission to her mother's schemes. Papa is, of course, very much relieved ; he is marvellously taken with Giacinta."

CHAPTER XLV.

MATRONS IN COUNCIL.

"What had I then ? A Hope that grew
Each hour more bright and clear—
The flush upon the eastern skies
That showed the sun was near :
Now night has faded far away,
My sun has risen, and it is day."

It was an infinite comfort to Lady Braden to be delivered from the dread which had so suddenly encompassed her ; for she, it must be remembered, had known nothing of Giuditta's appearance till after her revelation in the library ; and the idea of the publicity which would be given to painful family events, in case of the affair proceeding to a lawsuit, was distressing to her to the last degree. Nor was her grief less than her husband's at this fresh discovery of their unhappy son's unworthiness, and she shrank from seeing either the child or Giacinta, all innocent as they were.

"I am placed in a grievous dilemma," she said to her old and tried friend, Mrs. Arnison ; "the time fixed for

Emily's marriage is fast approaching, and there is no reason why it should be postponed. I cannot bear the idea of having the wedding here, after all that has occurred, nor can I make up my mind to go to town, where Sir Paul now proposes the ceremony should take place. I wish you would advise me, Rose."

"Nay, Letitia dear," was the reply; "in such a matter you must be by far the best judge. What does Christina say? and what are Emily's own wishes?"

"They both incline to London. We have had no festivities here since Mary's marriage, and the disclosures of these Italian women have revived past sorrows with a bitterness it is hardly possible for you to conceive. And it is due both to Emily and to Philip that no shade should be cast over their union, of which we all so thoroughly approve. Rose, I am afraid your old friend is very selfish."

"Selfishness used not to be any sin of yours, Letty; what makes you bring accusations against yourself just now?"

"Because I am shrinking from the effort which is necessary to appear at all at this wedding; I have been thinking whether I might not plead my delicate health as an excuse for absenting myself from the entire ceremony. Christina must, of course, go up to town, and that speedily, in order to assist Emily in her preparations; Hilda naturally appears as a bridesmaid, with your Flossie; now if you would let me have Irene, while all my own people are away, I should be so very thankful."

"My dear friend, Irene is so unwell that I am deeply anxious on her account; and—may I speak faithfully to you, Letty? may I say to you exactly what is in my mind?"

"Surely you may, Rose! When have we two ever hidden our hearts from each other?"

"But I am going to find a little fault with you!"

"I guessed that. 'Speaking faithfully' generally does include a little blame, does it not, Rose dear? Say on."

"I should not say it, Letty, if you had not already laid some small blame upon yourself. I do think you would be acting selfishly if you carried out this idea of staying

away from your daughter's wedding. You would grieve both her and Mr. Harwood, and—*may* I say it?—I think Sir Paul would feel it excessively. In fact, it would throw a damp over the whole affair; and you really are not ill enough to make a journey to London at all hazardous. Won't you try to rouse yourself, Letty dear?"

"I suppose I ought; I *know* I ought," said Lady Braden, the tears starting in her mild eyes; "but oh, Rose, if you knew what it sometimes costs me to appear at all cheerful and composed! This nursing of grief is morbid, you will say; yet can I help the feeling that things can never, never again be as they were? It was an awful dispensation. I wonder every now and then how I bore it, why I did not die when my poor boy was buried; and I knew that he had himself taken the life that God had given him! And he was such a dear lad when he was a little one, so bright and loving, so full of drollery, so ready to bring all his childish troubles to his mother! Letty, I believe I loved him more than all or any of my other children."

"You loved him differently, not more, dear. We mothers have always a peculiar passion for our firstborn, I think; yet we do not love the younger ones less. But—is it well to dwell upon the past, seeing that things are as they are, and cannot now be altered? Can you not, for the sake of the dear children who are left to you, live again in the present, though perhaps not fully?"

"I sometimes fear I cannot. And yet my husband has made the sacrifice; not less than I he felt the bitter blow; see how his hairs are whitened and his figure bowed! But he has long ago roused himself to take his place in the household, and to some extent in the county; he was always the stronger."

"As the husband, I think, should be. We women, who have vowed 'to obey,' like to feel that there is something morally to compel obedience in our lords and masters. Letty, I do think you might be the better in yourself if you left Bradenshope for a little while; you have had no change since you settled down here last spring."

"I wished for none; and we had such a calm and

happy summer—comparatively happy, that is. Hilda was the sunshine of our house; to Sir Paul and to myself, as well as to Christina, she has been an incalculable source of brightness and comfort. And Walter is most blessed in securing such a wife. She is the dearest girl."

"I am so glad you appreciate Hilda. I sometimes wonder, though, that she should be what she is, taking into account her disadvantages of education. A more worldly-minded, selfish woman than Mrs. Mowbray it is impossible to imagine."

"How abominably she treated that poor child, shaking her off, and deliberately washing her hands of her, after having profited so largely from her office as protectress and chaperon. Such a mere child as she was, too, in her knowledge of the world, and without any experience of life! What would have become of her if Mrs. Dorothy had not determined to receive her?"

"In that case we should have added her to our own family, adopted her as a tenth daughter, as indeed she became to us during her long illness last winter. It was a real trouble to us when we found that the Blue House could not comfortably remain the home of both Hilda and Louis Michaud."

"Your trouble turned out to be our consolation, for we should never really have known dear Hilda had she not become our inmate, and lived among us day after day during Mrs. Dorothy's absence. How completely it seems to have been ordered! Had not the lady of High Endlestone taken that journey—and who would have predicted such a freak of her a year ago?—Hilda's visit here would have terminated at the end of a fortnight or three weeks; and if Louis Michaud had not so unexpectedly fallen in love with Hilda, her natural home, while her elder aunt was away, would have been with you at the Blue House. Surely Providence sent her to us, for our son's happiness and our family comfort!"

"I do not doubt it; all these things are 'ordered,' though too often we fail to acknowledge the guiding Hand that led us by devious and unlikely paths to the very thing that was best for us. I must confess, though, that I cannot to this moment understand Louis' brief

passion for Hilda. His first affections were certainly given to Flossie, he says so now; then suddenly he was seized with a fancy for Hilda, and without much reflection he declared himself. Rejected by her, he turned again to Flossie—for consolation and sympathy, he says—and very soon he began to feel that, after all, it was Flossie herself and not Hilda who alone could make him happy."

"But are you not rather afraid for Flossie? It seems to me that M. Louis must be of a fickle disposition—just a little imbued with the spirit of my poor Paul. He appears not quite to have known his own mind."

"He certainly did not, and many a young man, however well-principled and steady, is in the same predicament. Some natures are very easily impressed, some hearts very quickly touched; Louis is essentially practical and far-sighted in business-matters, but apart from business he is not so dependable. He is a Christian man, or I should have feared lest, in some unguarded hour, he might make shipwreck of his life, or, at least, miss that which would have ensured its fulness and success. His fancy for Hilda was *but* a fancy! I was convinced of that at the time, and I was glad of it, both for Flossie's sake and for Hilda's. There had been *something*—not an understanding—between Louis and Flossie, but a sort of sentiment between them, which had really gone deeper than either of them imagined. They suit each other admirably; they will be devoted to each other after a fashion! Each will give his and her utmost; and if that utmost be of a different complexion from that which some of us have regarded as 'true love,' it concerns only those who are to spend their lives together. Flossie is perfectly satisfied, and so is Louis; she will be to him an affectionate, faithful wife, gay and radiant, and perhaps a little careless. He will be to her a thoroughly good, kind husband, and as the years go on—if God spares them—they will grow into each other's thoughts and feelings more and more, and grow elderly in regular Darby and Joan fashion. But they will never be to each other what Ralph and I are—nor what Aunt Dorothy and Harry Rivers would have been, had no cruel relatives come

between them—no! nor what Walter and Hilda will be when they are what we call ‘old married people!’”

“I am aware of that, Rose; and yet Flossie is your daughter. How is it that children of the same parents, bred and reared under the same influences, and trained in the same observances, differ so widely in character, and develop so variously? Look at your own three girls! Alice so dear and good and womanly; Flossie so brilliant and charming and good too, but more fitted to shine in society, to enact the great lady, than is sweet Alice, who will ever be loveliest at her own fireside and in her husband’s home. And Irene—well! Irene is almost too much of an angel—almost what people call ‘too good for this world.’”

“Hush, Letty, hush! That is just the conviction that from time to time steals into my own mind. I sometimes fear that our child of peace is going to leave us. And yet she is not exactly ill; our own good Doctor Clayton, and that eminent physician we consulted at York, both declare there is *no disease!* Only the springs of life seem running low—a failure—I know not what—and something which neither medicine nor any kind of treatment touches. She is as quietly, serenely happy as ever, and in her own calm way takes the deepest interest in all that goes on around her; but there is a difference, a change, which is indescribable. She says nothing about—about going away from us; and yet as I hear her talk, and see her move in and out among us, I am reminded of one who is on a pleasant visit which must presently be concluded. And there is a far-off look in her sweet eyes that I never saw there before.”

“I trust it is only a return of the old weakness, Rose dear. When I saw her last she looked very, very fragile; but then we have always lamented her delicacy—and I think the hot summer tried her a good deal, and she felt parting with Alice. Still, Rose, if God did call your child to Himself, how small a grief would yours be compared with mine! Your sweet star would set on the horizon, only to rise in brighter, happier skies. Ah! well, the heart knoweth its own bitterness, and our own cross seems harder to bear than any other.”

"But our dear Lord knows all about it, and in all our afflictions He is afflicted, and the angel of His Presence is with us. Yes, Letty, it is as you say: if this sorrow come upon me, it will indeed be a light one weighed with yours. My dear child will be safe in the arms of Infinite Love—even as she is now!—only beyond our sight. While *your* grief—it does not do to talk of it—it makes one question of the why and wherefore."

"The only cordial for that is, 'What thou knowest not now, thou shalt know hereafter.' All will at last be well, and all God's ways lead heavenward."

"Ay! even though the way wind round the very mouth of the pit. Only to have faith!—to take it all on trust, and wait—*wait* to see the salvation of the Lord. Speaking of the difference in our children, Letty, I think it is very much the same with families as with the world, and it takes 'all sorts,' you know, to make up a world—the world that God Himself has framed. I don't think we should be the better, even as separate families, if we were all on one pattern. The gardener does not vex himself because his roses are not lilies, nor his tulips violets! And apples and pears and plums grow in the same orchard, and the downy peach and golden apricot have their roots in the lowly strawberry-bed. Also, as somebody—I forget who—wrote, 'God made gay cockatoos, as well as sweet nightingales and useful hens!' I have often thought, Letty, what a good thing it is that no man or woman, however good and noble, was trusted to order the world's course, or even to make it in the rough. The grandest, most God-like man, is the one who sees the different sides of things: to see one side only of a grand truth is to deceive oneself and to become a fool—yes! but only God Himself sees *all round* any subject, for everything and every truth is a polyhedron. *He* saw fit to institute variety in men and women, as in flowers and fruit, and we must not quarrel with this same exquisite variety when we find it about our tables and on our own home-hearths."

"It is, however, extremely perplexing, because we are all so apt to get in ruts, and to think that the second must be as the first, and the first as in the older days; that to-morrow must be as to-day, and the years to come as the

years that have been, while all the while the round world itself, and all that is upon it, is changing continually."

"And—progressing?"

"Undoubtedly! you cannot question it, Rose?"

"No! no! a thousand times—no! Only I wanted to hear what you would say, for life has been so much more various, so much more complicated to you than to me. If there is one expression of thought more utterly foolish and to be contemned than another, it is—the good old times! Only extreme ignorance can be pardoned for the use of it; for every page of history, from the so-called books of Moses downwards to our own Macaulay and Froude, give the phrase the lie direct. There have been short periods of comparative stagnation—there was one just before our time, Letty; but God did not create and constitute a world in its entirety and perfection all at once, any more than He makes prize-roses without soil, and natural gases, and man's culture. He meant the races to go on inheriting all wisdom and all goodness, from the generations that have gone before. I think as Ralph thinks, that the present days are the best the world has ever seen, though, without doubt, that which is will be exceeded by that which is to come; and that, according to God's own system of development and progression."

"Certainly, when progression ceases, stagnation sets in, and continued stagnation means death, and consequent corruption; and though death is an incident in mortal life, it is not, I suppose, intended to be the fate of humanity, as such. God made man—that is, the whole race—for Eternity. I dearly love that verse of Tennyson's—

"We have but faith, we cannot know,
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from Thee,
A beam in darkness:—let it grow."

"Who does not love all that grand prefatory canto? What follows is not less beautiful,—

"Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul according well,
May make one music as before,

“‘But vaster. We are fools and slight;
We mock Thee when we do not fear:
But help Thy foolish ones to bear;
Help Thy vain worlds to bear Thy light.’”

“Exactly. But all this while, Rose, we have talked and talked discursively, according to our ancient habit, and have come no nearer to a settlement of the question with which we commenced our conversation. Shall I make an effort, and write to my husband, saying that I am about to follow him to town in order to prepare for the wedding?”

“My dear Letty, that is for you to decide. You know what Sir Paul and the others would wish, and none but you can know what the exertion would really cost you. What does Christina say?”

“She says nothing; she will not throw her word into either scale, lest, as she observes, she should be counselling her mother. All I can get from her is—‘Mamma, you must know best,’ or, ‘Let papa decide for you!’”

“That is safe advice, anyhow. Why not let Sir Paul finally settle it?”

“Because his decision will be that I consult my own feelings; and, as I told you, I begin to be afraid that I have studied those same feelings quite too much already. Of course, my proper place just now is at the head of my own family. Christina and Agnes are the best of sisters, and never was such a father as my husband, except perhaps your own, Rose—in some things I allow Ralph Arnison to stand on an equality with Sir Paul; but a girl when she marries wants her mother, and Emily is such a thorough mother’s child. Yes, I believe I *ought* to go.”

“And if you believe you ought, you will go; and the effort, if it be continued, will gradually become less painful. You will see some old friends whom you have not met since your great trouble—that in itself will be a trial; but the meeting once over, the ordeal will be past, and there will remain only the pleasures of renewed intercourse. And, after all, the wedding will be a quiet one.”

“As quiet as can be—quieter, I dare say, than if we had it here; it takes so much to create a sensation in London. We shall have only our own family, including

Hilda, and some relations of James Crosbie's, two or three Harwoods—Philip's nearest kindred—and your Flossie, sister-bridesmaid with Hilda Capel. By the way, I remember Hilda would not officiate when Alice was married."

"No, nothing could induce her to be other than a spectator, though nobody could have taken a deeper interest in the whole affair than she did. She had not then recovered from the shock of the previous summer; she has blossomed out wonderfully since then. Aunt Dorothy tells me, in confidence, she never saw a greater alteration in any one. She can scarcely believe her to be the same drooping, spiritless, inert girl who came to the Grey House eighteen months ago."

"But she was greatly improved before Mrs. Dorothy left Endlestone?"

"Yes; but there is something in her now that no one ever noticed before. Her life has become fuller, her future is, humanly speaking, assured. She had made up her mind to be content with helping forward the happiness of others, and, lo! her own life's joy is put into her hands. Love, the great transformer, has wrought the change. Nor is it less remarkable in Aunt Dorothy herself. Those weeks of sad, but precious intercourse, seem to have done the work of a lifetime. In them one would think she had lived her whole life—the life she missed so many years ago. I am sure she feels herself as fully Harry Rivers' widow as if she had been his wife ever since she was five-and-twenty; and as for that young man, she is mother and grandmother all in one to him. And she actually talks of going up to London with her 'Sweet William' and making some stay there—on his account. It is full forty years, she says, since her last visit."

"London must appear only round the corner of the street after her Canadian experiences. She can take Hilda and Flossie under her wing, then, if you and Mr. Arnison still decline to 'assist' at the ceremony?"

"That is what she intends. We, you know, could not be away from home at present; Ralph is overwhelmed with business, and I must stay with Irene. I could not leave her, even for a day."

"If Mrs. Dorothy goes to town, then, I should like her to be at the wedding, and, of course, her 'grandson.' She is quite one of ourselves, and we will take 'Sweet William' on trust. The girls were drawing up their list of guests yesterday, and declaring that another young man must be impounded, if all the young ladies were to be accommodated with *beaux*."

"But you will want a cavalier for Mrs. Dorothy herself."

"She shall have Sir Paul, as there is no Mrs. Harwood senior. I will write to her at once."

Lady Braden wrote that very evening, and Mrs. Dorothy immediately accepted, both for herself and for "Sweet William." The latter demurred a little—"But I am only a wild Canadian, grannie. I don't know European manners and points of etiquette. I shall put my foot into it and scandalise you all."

"Not a bit of it. Hilda will instruct thee; thou hast only to do as others do, and thou hast a quick comprehension. Besides, a gentleman is a gentleman all the world over, and Canada is but a piece of Greater Britain."

"There is a little gilt-edged book on etiquette somewhere about the house," said Hilda, mischievously; "it is the property of one of the maids, I believe. I have no doubt I can borrow it for William."

"Out upon thee for thy mawkish suggestion, Hilda Capel! I will not have my grandson thus inducted. Books on etiquette must needs be vulgar. No! thou must take him in hand thyself."

"I cannot undertake the responsibility," replied Hilda, quite demurely; "besides, I shall be with Walter. We shall have so very much to say to each other, after more than a month's separation. But I will find you a preceptor, William—I shall solemnly command you to Agnes Braden's care."

"*Agnes* Braden! I have not seen her, have I?"

"No; she left home the day after your arrival. The two who were here the other day were Christina—Miss Braden—and Emily, who is about to become Mrs. Harwood."

"Is Miss Agnes like the bride-elect?"

"Very much like. Strangers frequently take Agnes and Emily for twins, though when you come to know

them intimately the puzzling resemblance disappears. And I think Agnes the prettier of the two, though probably Mr. Philip Harwood is of another opinion."

"I have no doubt Miss Agnes is the prettier. Is *she* engaged, Cousin Hilda?"

"Not that I know of. I think I may say 'No' with absolute certainty. Why do you ask?"

"Lest I should fall in love at first sight. It is not quite fair to introduce a fellow to charming girls, and then tell him they are all engaged. First of all, there is yourself—spoons on Mr. Braden. What is the matter? Have I said anything improper?"

"Yes! that is dreadful slang, and besides, it is Mr. Braden who is 'spoons' on me. I never could make out why lovers should be called *spoons*, and stigmatised as *spony*. Don't say it again, sir."

"I sit corrected. I will put it differently. You are attached to Mr. Braden. No! He is attached to you! Then there is Miss Arnison, and she is betrothed to the Frenchman; and this Miss Emily, whom I thought one of the sweetest girls I had ever seen, and she is on the point of marriage with Mr. Harwood! I think you have a great many pretty, nice young ladies in this part of the country, grannie. Well, if I must go to this wedding, I must; on condition, however, that I am carefully instructed and prompted by Miss Agnes Braden."

And so Bradenshope and the Grey House were both speedily deserted, and Barker, to her intense mortification, was left behind. Only Flossie went up from the Blue House, though Louis Michaud was quite sure business would call him to town within another fortnight. And Flossie left Endlestone in excellent spirits, for Irene was wonderfully better—"more herself," they all said, "than she had been for many months."

CHAPTER XLVI.

“LA VENDETTA.”

“ In her ear he whispers gaily,
‘ If my heart by signs can tell,
Maiden, I have watched thee daily,
And I think thou lov’st me well.’
She replied, in accents fainter,
‘ There is none I love like thee.’
He is but a landscape-painter,
And a village maiden she.
He to lips that fondly falter
Presses his without reproof;
Leads her to the village altar,
And they leave her father’s roof.

* * * * *
‘ Oh, that he
Were once more that landscape-painter
Which did win my heart from me ! ’ ”

“ONCE more in London ! ” said Hilda, as she found herself rattling over the stones through the familiar streets. “ It seems only yesterday I left it ; but, oh ! how much has happened ! It is scarcely the same Hilda who comes back again to the old haunts. Why, I have lived a lifetime since I drove this same way in the bright September morning with poor old Parrott, who was so shocked when I proposed travelling second-class. Where is she now, I wonder ? And where is Aunt Mowbray ? One little note, which really told me nothing about herself, is all I have received since our miserable parting. She was very unkind—and yet I do not know that it was meant for unkindness. I was no longer an acquisition, but an encumbrance—a very decided encumbrance ! I should have been a dead weight upon her hands had we remained together, which, happily for both of us, we did not. *Most* happily for me ! —for what should I not have missed had I not perforce given up the old worldly life ? —had I not gone into exile in the desolate North ? Yes, that was

the way I put it—Endlestone was a sort of Botany Bay to me, and I hated the very name of it! And now it would be a terrible grief if I were told that I might see it nevermore. Ah! how little we know what is waiting for us, either for good or ill; and what a comfort it is to be sure that God knows, and that His knowledge includes all wisdom, all love, all foresight, and all forbearance."

While Hilda thus cogitated she was nearing the end of her journey, for Lady Braden had secured rooms for Mrs. Dorothy in Harley Street, only a few doors from her own town-house—a family going abroad for health had left behind them just the very house that the lady of High Endlestone required. Walter was there to receive them; he would have met them at the station, but that Hilda had expressly bidden him remain to welcome them in Harley Street. Christina, too, ran down immediately after their arrival; she had watched for the carriage passing—for it was the Bradenshawe carriage which had been sent to the station to meet the northern train. It was understood that during their stay in town they should form one family.

After dinner the betrothed pair found themselves alone in the little sitting-room which was to be Hilda's private sanctum; of course they had a great deal to say to each other after their five weeks' separation, an almost daily letter being counted by each correspondent as little better than nothing! It was wonderful how many questions were waiting to be asked and answered, and how many little explanations were required, before they could both feel fully *en rapport* once more, regarding past, present, or future. Of course Hilda was anxious to know all about Giacinta and little Paolo.

"And is the matter really settled?" she asked, when Walter had finished his account of various interviews with the lawyers, and with Giacinta herself.

His reply was, "It is settled, inasmuch as it can never come into court, because the marriage as it stands is legally good for nothing. Giacinta, in the eyes of English law, was never Paul's lawful wife, though in Italy, and among her own people, her position was never questioned. Giuditta, of course, is furious; but Giacinta,

who is really extremely sensible and right-minded, sees precisely how things are, and knows that her son cannot succeed his father as heir of Bradenshope, even if I were willing to relinquish every claim."

"And you are sure it is *just*, Walter? Justice and law do not always go together."

"That is a puzzle to me, I must confess, Hilda. It scarcely appears right to make so sacred a thing as marriage a mere matter of geography; and a marriage in Italy, it seems to me, ought to be a marriage in England!"

"And so it is generally, is it not?"

"Certainly it is. But in this case there is the difference of religion, and the suppression of the name, both of which, or either of which, would tend to invalidate the ceremony. There were also certain other irregularities of which we have only just become cognisant; some one has been to Rimesso—a person in Mr. Warwick's confidence, and one who fully understands the foreign marriage laws, and their force as connected with our own—and he declares unhesitatingly that though Paul might have had the greatest difficulty in throwing off Giacinta, and though his relations with her would have gone far to render null and void any future alliance into which he might have wished to enter, the marriage solemnised at Rimesso by Father Cristoforo is a dead letter, as concerns the inheritance. Nothing short of an Act of Parliament could constitute little Paolo heir of Bradenshope. Had Paul lived, and had a large family of boys been born to him, not one of them could have succeeded. I should still have been next in the succession, in spite of Giacinta's sons, acknowledged or unacknowledged."

"Poor Giacinta! I am deeply sorry for her. It must have been a terrible blow to her to discover her real position."

"It is a thousand pities, or, rather, it seems so, that her impetuous mother stirred up the affair. The poor girl herself had not an idea that her marriage could possibly be disputed, nor her child's legitimacy called in question; she was—and apart from the inheritance she really is—Paul's honourable wife,—or widow, rather. She was perfectly content with her boy in her own home; she

had no ambitious dreams, she was happy in her retired and humble life ; for these Della Roccas, it seems, are in easy circumstances, though not wealthy, and Giacinta herself is something of an heiress, through one of the Sampieri of Corsica. You shall go and see her to-morrow, my dear—that is, if you do not object."

" I should like to see her ; I have felt so much interest in her ever since I read Agnes' letter. But you will go with me ? "

" Of course I will ; she and I are quite good friends, and I have taught her to call me brother ! Giuditta, however, regards me with a very gloomy countenance ; she looks upon me as her grandson's rival and enemy."

" Are you safe with her ? Remember she is a Corsican, and she believes in the institution of the *vendetta* ! "

" I should not feel quite happy if I were at her mercy away in Corsica ; but one never hears of *la vendetta* transplanted to English soil. And I am sure Giacinta would not let her harm me ! If poor Paul himself were in the way, I expect nothing would keep her back from him ; for of course, she does not in the least comprehend these left-handed marriages, which are at the same time lawful and unlawful ; and if the child be not his legal heir, she says, he has dishonoured Giacinta, and herself, and her dead husband, and all their ancestors of the family of Della Rocca, and of the house of Sampiero."

" I do not wonder at her taking such a view of the situation. It seems impossible to be at once a wife and no wife ; to have legitimate children, who are yet barred absolutely from their father's ancestral inheritance."

" It does seem strange, yet it is a fact. But I must tell you there are serious doubts whether the marriage would stand, even in Italy, when it came to be inquired into. The person most to be blamed is Father Cristoforo, who had some inkling that John Paul was not the bridegroom's true name, though he is ready to take oath that it never occurred to him to suspect him of heresy. Paul, it seems, conformed outwardly to his wife's creed, inasmuch as he went to mass pretty frequently—up to the time of his marriage, at least ; and it is quite true that he offered tapers at the shrine of San Paolo. Giacinta, however,

admits that his want of religion was a source of deep grief to her—he *never* went to confession, and he had no reverence for the Holy Sacraments; also, he called the Blessed Virgin—or her image, rather—‘an ugly doll!’ Still, his orthodoxy was taken for granted. I am afraid Father Cristoforo had a shrewd notion that the marriage, though celebrated with all due form of ritual, and in the presence of the whole population of Rimesso, *might* turn out to be a mere sham. At any rate, he suspected John Paul, or Giovanni Paolo, of being somebody else.”

“The other day we were all—that is, we three at the Grey House—discussing this question of a marriage under a false name. And Aunt Dorothy hunted up a law-book, a sort of Blackstone made easy, I believe, and Cousin William came upon a very curious piece of information. A man may marry a woman, or a woman a man, under an assumed name, and if either marry the other in good faith, unwitting of the deception, the marriage is lawful and must stand. If, on the contrary, *both* are cognisant of the fraud, the marriage is illegal and invalid, for the parties have conspired together to cheat the law.”

“I have heard something of the kind myself; but on this very point there have been alterations, I believe. You seem to have taken very kindly to ‘Cousin William.’”

“Yes, I like him immensely, and I am so glad he has come to the Grey House, for now Aunt Dorothy will not miss me when—when you take me away.”

“Perhaps you would rather remain, and enjoy the society of Cousin William?”

“I had not thought of such an alternative; now you have put it into my head.”

“I do not mind it being in your head, so that it does not get into your heart!”

“And it is not very likely to get there. ‘Sweet William’ is all very well, but——no! I will not say what was on my lips, lest I make you conceited; it never answers to give men too good an opinion of themselves!”

“Nor women either, does it? But a truce to nonsense; what do you think I saw in to-day’s *Times*? ”

“A piece of news? Anything that concerns myself?”

"Yes and no ! It would have concerned you, though, if you had ever become Mrs. Trelawny."

"I guess ! there is an heir-apparent born ; Lady Polperro has a son ?"

"You are not quite a witch, but that is precisely what has occurred. 'On the 13th inst., at Camelford Park, the Viscountess Polperro, of a son and heir.' I heard that such an event was anticipated, for since I came to town I have seen a great deal of Poinsett, who married Miss Tregelles—a cousin of the Trelawnys, is she not ? And still further, the Viscountess is Poinsett's own sister. You will like Poinsett, Hilda ; I have promised to introduce you to Mrs. Poinsett."

"If she is Clara Tregelles—and she must be—she is Horace Trelawny's own cousin, though I never saw her."

"Would you rather not meet her ? If it would revive painful memories——"

"Not at all ! 'There are no birds in last year's nests.' I am only too thankful to have escaped Horace Trelawny ; a few weeks later, and my fate might have been sealed. And, as I have told you before, Walter, I know now, and I have known ever since I began to care for you, that I *never* loved him ! I thought I did, but what I took for affection was only flattered vanity, and a foolish girl's gratification in her first proposals. And really—and I am not fishing for a compliment—I was then altogether unworthy of a truly good man's love. Such a frivolous, empty-headed, worldly-minded creature as I was in those days ! "

"Since it is yourself who says so, I suppose I may not contradict. But I should not permit any one else to utter such cruel slanders of my affianced wife. I cannot believe that you were ever the worldly-minded, shallow, heartless young person you profess yourself to have been."

"I was brought up in the world's most heartless school ; but mind, I do not think I was naturally *quite* selfish, *quite* heartless ! I needed discipline, though, and I had it. Every trouble of those days was a blessing in disguise."

"It was a blessing that saved you from Mr. Trelawny—he is leading a sad, wild life, Poinsett tells me ; and a

still greater blessing that reserved you for myself. Do you know that we are in for the Keppels' wedding?"

"I heard something about it. When is it to be?"

"Next Thursday fortnight; a week earlier than Emily's. I accepted for you, of course."

"I have a dress that will do; Lady Braden hinted that I was expected to 'assist' at the ceremony, and at the breakfast, and she wished me not to decline, as both Chrissie and Agnes had backed out of the invitation."

"You are to represent the ladies of the House of Braden."

The next day, as soon as luncheon was over, Walter proposed to Hilda that they should go and pay their visit in Fitzroy Square. They found Giacinta alone, watching by the couch on which lay her child, who had had another severe attack of inflammation. Giuditta had gone out soon after breakfast, and had not yet returned. Hilda sincerely hoped she would be detained some time longer, so that a meeting with her might be avoided. Giacinta, she saw at a glance, was all that Agnes had described—beautiful, fragile, melancholy, and affectionate.

"I have brought Hilda," said Walter, when he had saluted Giacinta in brotherly fashion. "This is our sister-in-law," turning to his betrothed, "Mrs. Braden, of whom we have talked so much lately. And here is our little nephew; how is he to-day, Giacinta?"

"Better, the Holy Virgin be praised! He was very ill the night before last; it was that dreadful complaint in the throat. The doctor called it—ah! I cannot remember, and we have no name for it in Italian; something like *crook*!"

"Was it not *croup*?"

"Yes; croup! A most horrible sounding name, and a most horrible sort of illness! I thought my dear little Paolo would have choked; the *padrona* downstairs was very sorry for us, and did all she could, and presently my darling was relieved; but the chest has been very bad ever since."

"My brother Paul used to suffer terribly from croup, I have heard my mother say; indeed, we all had it, I think, but we outgrew it as we passed out of infancy."

"Ah, then, my boy will outgrow it!" exclaimed Giacinta, in a cheerful tone. But Hilda, as she gazed on the little sufferer, thought otherwise; he lay in a heavy slumber, his breathing short and quick, his skin hot and dry, his lips crimson with fever, and his tiny hands so thin that they looked more like a bird's claws than the hands of a child in his third year. The seal of death was evidently on the brow of the little Paolo; another and better inheritance than that of Bradenshove was awaiting him; and while his mother spoke of carrying him back, as soon as ever his strength permitted, to their own sunny land, Hilda and Walter could scarcely restrain their tears, for they knew that the wasted little frame was meetening fast for the shadows of the grave.

"It is this cruel climate that half kills him," said Giacinta, in a low voice; "I wish I had refused to listen to my mother; he was not strong, I feared the long journey for him, and I begged that we might wait for summer days; but my mother would not hear reason, and she talked and talked till I really began to feel that I was neglectful of my duty, that I was depriving my child of his just rights. Ah, if I had only known!"

"Does not Madame della Rocca now regret that she over-persuaded you?" asked Hilda.

"She will not confess that she does; she still believes that we are somehow defrauded of our rights—the little one and I. And she says I have the soul of a spider, because I care nothing for the inheritance. Indeed, from the first I did not care; when my mother said that Paolo might be a great English lord, I thought 'I would rather he were a good man in his own country!' You see, though we are not poor, and though we come of a good stock, we are not much above the peasants, and I have received very little education. The nuns at Sta. Lucia di Tallano taught me to read and write, and to do a little embroidery; and I was always fond of music, and could sing pretty well. And then after I was married I tried to study other things—history and geography, for my husband knew everything, and though my ignorance, at first, seemed to amuse him, he soon grew tired of it, and told me I was only fit for a fisherman's wife. I had

always known English, as I have told you, through a lady who lived near us when I was a child, and took great pains with me. Still, I was never meant to be a great lady ; I was happy enough in my own cottage, among the vines and olive trees ; I liked to see Paul paint his pictures, while I cooked the dinner and saw to the house. It came upon me like a cloud of darkness, the suspicion that my husband was not a poor artist, earning his bread by his brush and palette, but a noble gentleman, with a grand name ! I would have given worlds to be assured that he was what I believed him to be in those happy days when first I loved him. I tell you the truth, brother, when I say that, in marrying Giovanni Paolo, I never dreamed that I was intruding myself upon a family noble as yours."

"We are not noble, Giacinta ; we are only old county people, of ancient descent ; and a baronet in England—and there is no such title out of England—is not counted a nobleman. Well, my dear sister, though your marriage has brought trouble to us all, and most of all to yourself, we are very glad to have known you, and to claim you as one of ourselves. No blame is to be attached to you."

"Except that I disobeyed and deceived my mother, and for that I am punished—bitterly punished ! You have been very kind to me, but as soon as my child is stronger, I shall go back to Rimesso, and to my old cottage, where once I lived with Paul. It was not for long, for he grew dreadfully tired of the simple neighbours and their ways, and he said the sight of the mountains always there—morning, noon, and night—wearied him to death, and the rustling of the vines and the olive-boughs close in his ears made him nervous ; and life, he said, was only to be found in great cities—no other life was worth the living ! To have one's residence at Rimesso, or at any of the mountain villages, was to be buried alive. Ah ! but while he was contented, we were very, very happy, and I thought myself the luckiest girl that ever wore a ring. If he had but been the poor wandering artist we all thought he was—and nothing more ! "

"The lady of Burleigh, in very deed," said Hilda,

turning with a sad smile to Walter. Then to Giacinta—"Do you not think this place is too close for you, as well as for the child? The air here is smoky, and the street is gloomy, and there is a good deal of noise in the house. All that singing below us will awake little Paolo, I am afraid."

"He is used to it. It does not generally disturb him when once he is sound asleep. My brother Walter, and the dear lady his mother, and that sweet Agnes, have all urged me to move into another neighbourhood; but when I spoke of it to the doctor, he shook his head, and said for the present it must not be, and that this air was as good for the child as any in London. He was too weak to be moved just yet; only, he added, 'If Italy were as near as Richmond, I should urge you to risk it; *native air* is what he wants.' But in this I am decided: let some nice warm weather come—and they tell me it often does come for a few days, three or four, perhaps, in your English springs—I shall at once set out with him. I shall hold myself in readiness. In my arms—and he would not be out of them night or day—he could not suffer much fatigue."

"Poor mother!" thought Hilda; "the warm days may come, but not for him; no sunshine of England or of Italy will ever revive that little drooping frame. She does not know, but he is sinking fast."

Then followed some further conversation on business matters; Walter was anxious to know if Giacinta had plenty of money, for it was his father's express desire and command that she should spare nothing for herself or for the child. Fruit and wine, and every luxury that wealth could procure, were at her service, very much to Giuditta's indignation; she personally would not touch the gifts of the proud *Inglesi*, who trampled on her grandson's rights, and bribed their men of law to deny him even a just hearing. Somehow, Giacinta's veins seemed filled with gentler and sweeter blood than that of which the Della Roccas and the Sampieri were so boastful. Clearly, she would never cherish the horrible *vendetta*.

"I was to give you this," said Walter, drawing forth a roll of gold; "and you know you cannot please us better

than by spending it freely on whatever you like best, or on what you think the child might fancy. Let him have as many strawberries as he will take! they are good for him."

And strawberries just then, in the middle of a most inclement March, were about worth their weight in gold, as Giacinta had discovered. She pressed Walter's hand gratefully—she could take anything from these loving and generous Bradens, her dead husband's nearest kins-folk, and her boy's own relatives,—when suddenly she was conscious that her mother had entered the room.

She had been to her daughter's, or rather to her own, "man of law," and he had finally assured her that she had no case to go upon, as it was fully agreed on all hands that the issue of so irregular a marriage could never inherit closely entailed English property. Her rage was so excessive that the lawyer—whom she accused of conspiracy—was fairly frightened; he had actually shown the white feather, and run away from his extraordinary and, as he doubted not, half crazy client. She, finding that her curses were addressed only to walls and deed-boxes and office furniture, went home to Fitzroy Square, vowing endless vengeance on the family of the treacherous, evil-minded Giovanni Paolo.

"Touch not his gold!" she cried, in her native tongue and in her own island dialect; "he is a traitor! He and his pretend to prove that you were never that villain's wife! that you were what no Sampiero ever was before! Behold his just reward!"

Giacinta had just time to fling herself on Walter with a cry of terror; a bright, keen stiletto—one of the Sampiero heirlooms—was in her mother's hand, and her eyes were gleaming with mad fury. A second more, and it would have been buried in the young man's breast; but the aim turned suddenly aside, the would-be murderer slipped, and almost fell on the couch where the sick child was just awaking. It all happened in a moment—Walter was saved, Hilda was swooning, and Giacinta, frozen with horror, was bending over little Paolo, who had been severely wounded in the arm and shoulder.

CHAPTER XLVII.

"LITTLE PAOLO."

"Joy thy spirit fills,
Pure sunshine thou dost see,
The sunshine of eternal rest.
Abide, my child, where thou art blest;
I, with our friends, will onward fare,
And when God wills, shall find thee there!"

HILDA's first impulse, as the faintness passed away—for she did not swoon outright—was to possess herself of the dagger or stiletto, which she had just seen gleaming in mid-air and aimed at her lover's heart. For several minutes the room had whirled round with her dizzy brain, a mist had floated before her eyes, a mingled impression of horror and of unreality had weighed upon her; but ere the moment of insensibility arrived she began to rally, the dingy, panelled walls, with their pictures of saints and brigands, gradually stood still, the dimness of vision passed, the light shone clear, and full consciousness returned. The stiletto lay on the floor; Walter and Giacinta were occupied with the child, who lay like death upon the blood-stained pillows; and Giuditta was standing still in the same spot on which she had dropped her weapon, dumb, motionless, and nerveless, as though Medusa's glance had suddenly caught hers and turned her into stone.

"Will he die?" sighed Hilda, as if awaking from a painful dream, and drawing near the couch. "Or is it—all over?"

"No, no! he is not dead," answered Walter, and his voice sounded a long way off, for Hilda was still striving with her faintness; "but he is very much hurt, I am afraid, and he ought to have medical aid immediately. Should you be afraid if I left you here, while I ran round to Dr. Dymond?"

“No, no! Oh, no! But should not that awful woman be secured?” And she spoke rapidly in French—a language which she rightly concluded Giuditta did not understand.

“She will not hurt any one now—the sight of the boy’s blood has paralysed her; but I will carry off the stiletto. On second thoughts, perhaps I had better take you away with me, and send you straight home in a cab?”

“No, I am not afraid; I will see the end of it; I will not leave Giacinta with that madwoman. Only do not come back alone, lest the fresh sight of you should revive her frenzy.”

“I am going for Dr. Dymond,” he said aloud, picking up the stiletto, and wrapping his handkerchief about it, for it was very keen and dangerous, and the case was in Giuditta’s keeping. It would scarcely have been prudent to demand it of her; a word, or a look, might rouse her from her sudden stupor, and revive the wild-beast thirst for vengeance. But she took no notice, as he put the weapon in his pocket; she did not even seem to see him. Was she struck with catalepsy, or was she in a trance?

Left alone, the two young women busied themselves with the wounded child. Giacinta had no thought but for her boy, and Hilda, catching her tone, became quite fearless, scarcely heeding the presence of that tall, strange, insensate figure, with wide-open, unseeing eyes, and statue-like limbs and features. The little one was severely cut, for the weapon had fallen slantwise on his shoulder and on his arm, only slightly protected by a linen night-dress. A thick woollen shawl, which might have served as some defence, he had flung aside in the moment of awaking. The blood still poured from the wound, nor could any endeavour of Hilda or his mother avail to stop the flow; both began to fear some artery had been severed, and the peculiar nature of the injury rendered it difficult to apply ligatures. They bound up the lower and sound part of the poor little member, and they applied cloths dipped in the coldest water they could procure, and suddenly Hilda bethought herself of ice, and begged that some might be sent for immediately. And all the while the poor boy lay moaning faintly, and gasping for

breath, his eyes closed, while the life-blood ebbed, and the cheeks and lips turned to livid paleness.

"*E morto! è morto!*" was the terrified exclamation of the fat *padrona* when she came upon the scene; but Hilda said, as calmly as she could, "No, he is not dead! See, he breathes, and he makes a little noise; he may be saved, if we can but stop the bleeding; and Dr. Dymond is sent for. Only, I implore you, get some ice; you will know the nearest place where it can be procured."

"There is the fishmonger in the next street," replied the *padrona*; "he has some, surely. Run, Biddy," to the good-natured, unkempt Irish help, who had followed her mistress to the scene of action.

"Indade, thin," she returned, "and there's ice the thickness of a crown piece on the wather-tub in yer own back-yard; leastways, there was this mornin', and there's bin no sun to spake of to melt it away. Shure, I'll fetch it this momint!"

And in less than a minute she was back again with a plateful of thin and very dirty ice, rapidly dissolving in the heightened temperature of the warm, close room. It melted so fast and would so little bear fingering, that Hilda again begged that the fishmonger might be applied to; she was quite sure the doctor would ask for ice as soon as he arrived. Other lodgers now began to crowd into the room, full of wonder, curiosity, and offers of assistance; but the *padrona*, with little ceremony, drove them back, and locked the door. And still the bleeding was not staunched, and the moaning was feebler and the breathing more difficult. Giacinta, having done all she could do, sank upon her knees, and passionately implored Madonna to save her boy. Hilda prayed too, but silently, and she was commanding the little one to the care of the Good Shepherd, who carries the lambs in His bosom, and gently leads the ailing to the fold. The sound of Giacinta's wild prayer, in which the *padrona* devoutly joined, seemed to awake the suspended faculties of the grandmother, and she turned her gaze mournfully on the group about the sofa, and sighed deeply. "He dies! he dies!" she murmured in her deep, low voice; "and it is I—I who loved him a thousand times better than the

mother who bore him—I who would have spent my last coin in wresting his rights from the usurper—I have killed him. Fate is against me—the blessed saints will not help. Let me die! Woe is me! I have killed him with my own rash hand!"

It was a relief unspeakable when Walter returned, and with him Dr. Dymond and his assistant. The doctor rapidly examined his patient, and at once declared that no mortal injury had been inflicted, no important vessel had been cut, though the glancing of a hair's-breadth of the sharp steel in the same direction would have produced fatal hemorrhage. He quickly bound up the wound, at the same time directing that spoonfuls of weak brandy and water should be administered. The child soon began to show symptoms of returning consciousness.

"Signora Della Rocca, I must request your immediate absence," Dr. Dymond said sternly to Giuditta; and she, looking pitifully in his face, replied, "He will not die? Oh, say he will not die?"

"I cannot say," was the answer. "I decline to give an opinion at present; but that you instantly retire I must insist! If you remain, I go."

Without a word she turned, and went into the adjoining bedroom, and perceiving the key in the door, the doctor unceremoniously turned it on her.

"Why do you do that?" inquired Giacinta, not quite pleased.

"That she may not return. The sight of her might throw the child into convulsions."

"I do not think he knows how the accident occurred; he was only half awake when the steel touched him."

"He probably knows more than you imagine; he is a child of wonderfully quick perceptions. Even if it were as you suppose, he must be kept perfectly still and quiet, and a person so excitable as the Signora is unsuited to a sick-room. Besides, it is impossible to say how all this will end. Mr. Braden, you will keep that stiletto."

"Do you know it?" said Walter, drawing it forth, and handing it to Giacinta, who shudderingly refused to touch it, but replied, "I know it as well as I know my own face in the glass! It has been in the family for I

know not how many generations, and more than once it has taken life. Oh! put it away—the dreadful, cruel thing I cannot bear to see it!"

The afternoon was now wearing to a close, and it was high time to return to Harley Street. Hilda wished to remain with Giacinta, but Walter would not permit it; he would not trust his treasure any longer in the vicinity of that awful woman. The *padrona* volunteered to remain with Giacinta for the night, for were they not compatriots, and both devotees of the same faith? and nothing further could be done for poor little Paolo; he would be best alone with his mother and her kindly landlady. The Signora was the greatest difficulty, both to the good doctor and to Walter. How could they leave Giacinta at the mercy of her mad mother?

Giacinta seemed to read their thoughts, for she said unquestioned—"She," pointing to the closed door, "is not to be feared. In her wildest frenzy she would not touch me or the child; the blow, as you are aware, was not intended for him. She went this morning to consult the lawyer we, or rather she, employed, and I expect he told her something which drove her to desperation. It is impossible to make her understand the true state of the case, and she is under the wildest delusions. I believe she had some crazy notion of compelling Sir Paul himself to abdicate, in favour of my poor child. She is kind and generous in her ordinary state of mind—my poor, mistaken mother—but when she is roused to the idea of vengeance, she is like a tigress. And she is a Corsican, you know, and the blood of *la vendetta* is in her veins."

"And in yours, too?" Walter could not help asking.

"Not entirely so. My father was only Corsican, as it were, by accident; his mother was a Florentine, and his father was of mingled race, and not pure Corsican as she is—a thorough-bred Sampiero. And I was always my father's child; I strongly resemble both in person and disposition my Florentine grandmother. At least, they have told me so, my father's own kindred at Rimesso. My mother and I have never been quite happy together; that was why I lived so much with the Della Rocca people at

Rimesso. No! you need not fear; she will be calm enough now, and I best know how to deal with her.”

“ You have had a narrow escape, Mr. Braden! ” said Dr. Dymond.

“ So narrow that I cannot yet realise it,” replied Walter; “ but, thank God, I am at this moment alive and unhurt. It was my sister-in-law, Madame Braden, who saved my life. I only wonder, Giacinta, that you were quick enough to prevent the stroke;—also,” he continued in a low voice, “ that you did not yourself receive it! ”

“ I saw it all at a glance,” she answered; “ and I caught sight of the handle of the stiletto, before she drew it forth; I did not know she carried it in her bosom. As for receiving the blow myself, I did not greatly care how it might be; life is not so fair and sweet that I should dread to part with it, and I am not afraid of death. Also, I knew that you, my brother, would take my boy, and be a father to him; that through you he would enjoy every right that his father’s child—and mine!—could claim. Perhaps it would have been better for him if that steel had entered my breast, only then my own mother would have been my murderer, and that would have been too dreadful! For, with all her faults she has a mother’s heart within her.”

“ She did not think much of my mother’s heart,” said Walter, as they went downstairs together—he, Hilda, and Dr. Dymond; the assistant remaining in case the bleeding should recur.

“ No, indeed,” replied the doctor; “ an awful woman! a truly awful woman! Only once have I seen one of her breed before, and she is now safe in Bethlehem Hospital. You are scarcely secure while she is in the country, Mr. Braden; she must be looked after.”

Hilda trembled, and clung more closely to Walter’s arm, while he felt as if he were living in Venice in the middle ages. “ But the child,” he presently resumed; “ will it recover? ”

“ Certainly not,” was Dr. Dymond’s unhesitating response; “ the child was doomed when I first saw him six weeks ago. He must have a naturally fine constitution, or he would not have struggled on so long. As for the wound, it is not so bad as it seems; it is not much more

than a flesh wound. But it is bad enough in his case, poor little fellow! He was slowly sinking before the injury; this morning it was a question of days—he might linger, I thought several weeks, even, if he had no further attack; now, though he may rally a little, he cannot last over to-morrow, I fear. His fierce grandmother will not have killed him, but she has shortened the brief life that remained to him. I shall not spare her if I see her again, I can tell you."

"I was so afraid there would have to be an inquest," said Hilda; "and then your mother, Walter, would have to know all about it."

"Ah! an inquest; it did flash through my own mind, while my poor little nephew lay, as I feared, bleeding to death. Is there any probability of such a thing, Dr. Dymond?"

"It is possible, of course; but, as the child has been manifestly dying for days, I think it may be avoided, even if he do not survive to-morrow. I can conscientiously give the necessary certificate, though I may think it prudent to add that the death was hastened by an unfortunate accident."

And then the trio separated, the doctor going to his patients, and Walter and Hilda home to Harley Street.

Great was the consternation of those who heard the story they had to tell. Walter made as light of it as possible, but his father and his sisters felt, with Hilda, that for the moment his life had trembled in the balance, and that it was only through the merciful interposition of Providence in the person of poor, brave Giacinta, that he was still preserved to them. "Shall we never cease to reap the bitter harvest of our unhappy Paul's evil deeds?" murmured the Baronet, sadly. "If Walter's life had been the sacrifice, how should we have borne it! God Almighty be praised that we were not called to so great a trial!" They were all very grave as they sat round the dinner-table that evening, and neither Hilda nor Walter had much appetite; they all felt how near they had been to a most awful catastrophe; the very shadow of death had been in their midst, though, by God's good mercy, only a shadow, nothing more.

"Is my mother to know?" asked Walter, as he parted from his father, who went home to dine.

"Not at present, I think," replied Sir Paul; "but we will tell her at some future time, when we can speak more lightly of the danger as of a thing of the past. And I am sure that dreadful woman with her diabolical *vendetta* ought to be put under restraint; we can't allow Corsicans to go about with their daggers and their vengeance unrestrained in this country! Thank God, we are Englishmen and Protestants!"

"I think the mother ought to know some day; I am by no means certain that we have acted wisely in concealing from her everything that might cause her agitation; several times—referring to Giuditta's first appearance—she has observed that she would much prefer to be told whatever might occur, and to know what evil is apprehended. It makes her nervous and suspicious to find herself excluded from any sort of confidence, even though it be from the best and most tender motives."

"After the marriage, and when Giuditta is fairly disposed of, we will tell her. I quite agree with you as to the impolicy of practising concealments among ourselves, but this is certainly a peculiar case. If she knew immediately what happened this morning, she would live in the momentary expectation of a fresh and fatal demonstration of the Signora's vengeance; in fact, the dread and the suspense would kill her. Your mother will never be what she was, Walter, before that terrible morning, when she found poor Paul dead upon his bed."

Almost at midnight, news was received from Fitzroy Square—the child was much better and seemed quite inclined to rally, the wound was going on favourably. In spite of the horrors of the morning, Giacinta was evidently in good spirits; her boy's smile was better to her than any kind of consolation, than the most invigorating cordial. Nothing was said about the miserable Signora.

In the morning, William Rivers, at Mrs. Dorothy's request, paid Giacinta a visit; he found Agnes Braden sharing her solicitous watch. He brought back the news that little Paolo was not quite so well; he was restless and feverish, and refused both food and medicine. Dr.

Dymond had appeared almost with the dawn, and in answer to the mother's anxious inquiries, said that the child was no worse than he expected to find him, but Madame Braden ought to know that he was in great danger, from a fresh access of his disease, as well as from the hemorrhage and shock of yesterday. And then Giacinta, looking into the good man's face, knew that she must lose her darling. "Cannot you—oh, cannot you save him?" she gasped. "The *padrona* speaks of some great physician, who all but restores from death!—you would not mind?"

"I would not mind whom you consulted. Nay, I would go myself and fetch any man who could possibly help the poor little fellow. But—I ought not to deceive you, Madame Braden—all the doctors in the world, from the Queen's physician to the most youthful village apothecary, could not save this dear child from the grave. You must be content to trust him to One who loves the little ones, and gathers the lambs in His bosom. Think, too, that he will suffer no more, that he has escaped all the snares and troubles of the world, that he is for ever with Him who said, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me.'"

"Ah! Holy Virgin!" was all poor Giacinta's cry. Her Christ was the mother Mary; little knew she of the Divine Father, of the Saviour of the world. But she grew very still, and though her face was white with anguish, the doctor knew that she would be calm and strong till all was over. The mother's love was greater than the woman's grief.

As Agnes was with Mrs. Braden, Hilda did not hasten to Fitzroy Square; she was not very well, for the events of the preceding day had shaken her nerves and inflicted upon her a severe headache. But late in the afternoon Walter came for her.

"Giacinta has asked for you," he said; "the child is evidently dying. Will you not come?"

Of course she would, and it was understood that they were not to be expected home till they actually appeared, for if the end was really so near, they would remain till the last. They made a hasty, impromptu dinner—for Mrs. Dorothy insisted upon their dining before they left

the house—and, just as the evening shadows were falling, drove off to Fitzroy Square. When they reached their destination they found the child sinking rapidly, though quietly ; Giacinta, immovable, at her boy's side ; and Agnes, worn out, longing to go home, but unwilling to leave her sister-in-law. The Signora was nowhere to be seen, the truth being that Giacinta, seconded by the padrona, had insisted upon her return to Leicester Square, where she would find several friends and many compatriots. The sound of her voice had seemed to disturb the dying child ; and the mistress of the house, frightened and scandalised at what had taken place under her roof, almost drove out her obnoxious inmate. The coast, therefore, was clear, to Hilda's infinite relief and to Walter's sincere satisfaction ; he was no coward, but it was a comfort to feel that he was not within reach of that vindictive woman's causeless hatred.

Agnes kissed the little white face on the pillow, and went away ; and then the three who were left commenced the watch that could only end in one way. As the evening wore on, the child's breath grew quicker and fainter ; and later still, when the dark night was over all, the baby-life ebbed rapidly. From time to time Giacinta mechanically told her beads or invoked her saints ; and more than once she sank upon her knees and prayed fervently.

It was past eleven when the end came. The boy had seemed to be sleeping quietly for a little while, the slight convulsions ceased, the drawn childish face resumed its usual expression, the soft, dark eyes opened, and a faint voice murmured sweetly, "*Mamma, mamma cara ! mamma mia !*"

"I am here, darling," responded Giacinta, in her native tongue, and pressing her cheek against the chilly ashen lips. "What is it, my soul, my jewel ?"

"So dark—all dark!" was the piteous little cry, though the gas was burning brightly.

"It will soon be light !" whispered Walter, in his best Italian ; "little Paolo will soon see the beautiful sunshine—God's own sunshine—happy little Paolo."

And the child responded feebly, "Happy little Paolo."

Then there followed a short interval of pain and sore

distress, the convulsions returned, and the breath came and went with choking sobs. Nothing could be done but to wrap the rigid limbs in hot flannels, and wet the parched lips with wine and water, while Giacinta called upon the Madonna to succour her in this supreme hour of her great anguish.

Presently the spasms ceased, and all was still; only a little fluttering breath told that mortal life still remained; the baby-spirit was on the wing to worlds unseen. Once more the child opened his eyes, smiled faintly on his mother, and said clearly, "Ah, the light, the sunshine! Oh, beautiful! beautiful!" And so he went home to God. And for a moment the mother could not weep, though her child lay lifeless in her arms; for

"She knew he was with Jesus,
And she asked him not again."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"THERE EVERLASTING SPRING ABIDES."

"But I shall be gone, past night, past day,
Over the hills, and far away."

"WHERE shall I bury my dead?" asked Giacinta, pathetically, when at last she fully realised the awful fact that of all her duties to her child this alone remained. And Walter replied, "Do not trouble yourself about that, my sister; we will undertake all that is necessary. The little one shall be honourably interred, and your wishes, in every respect, shall be consulted."

"My wish would be to take him to Rimesso," was the mother's answer; "but I am afraid that could not be."

"I am afraid not. I will, however, mention it to Sir Paul. He will be anxious to carry out any arrangement

you may desire to make; but it is a long way to Rimesso, and, as I understand, the journey there is difficult.”

“I should like to think he lay under the blue sky, where I could fancy he was asleep, and would wake presently to hear the rush of the waters, and to see all round him the great mountains. Twice since I have been in London I have seen your City churchyards; they looked all death and desolation—there was no consolation and no hope. I could not leave my child there.”

“You shall not. We will find some better place. Only, you know, Giacinta, the little one will not be there, under green turf or mouldering stone; a little dust will be rendered back to earth—nothing more. Your pretty boy is already with God, in the world of light and glory, whither you will follow him when you, too, are summoned. Try to think that the child is taken from the evil to come—that all is well.”

“Is it so very far to Bradenshope?”

“Not more than a fair day’s journey. Would you like him to be buried *there*, among his father’s own people?”

“If it cannot be Rimesso, in my own little hillside churchyard, where the great chestnut-trees shade the grass, I *should* like it to be Bradenshope. I shall never see his grave, but I should think my Paolo was in his right place, and resting with his father’s dead. Might it be, my brother?”

“I will speak to my father at once, dear, and I will see you again in a few hours. Whatever you wish, if it may be, shall be done.”

This was early in the morning of the day after little Paolo’s death, and Walter at once hastened to consult his father. Sir Paul was surprised, but not displeased, when he heard of Giacinta’s notion. “It is the child’s right, I suppose,” he said; “he is of the Bradens, and should therefore lie with them. His mother was my son’s wife, and I think we ought not, in any way, to disown, or seem to disown, her or her little one. I will go with you to Fitzroy Square.”

Sir Paul was deeply touched when he looked on the little wasted form, robed in purest white, with its tiny hands clasping a small crucifix folded on its breast. At

the head, and at the feet, stood two tall lighted tapers ; at the head also were pictures of the Virgin and of San Paolo, and a stoup of holy-water. Some lovely flowers, brought from Covent Garden Market, were scattered on the counterpane. Giacinta herself had laid him thus; she would not accept the aid of her *padrona* even. The grandfather looked long on this hapless little scion of his race ; then he said to Walter, "It is well—well for us, and well for him, poor innocent victim of his father's sins ! He has a fairer inheritance than ours ; look at his poor, tired little face, so weary, and yet at rest, and the impress of suffering past on every feature. He is wonderfully like the child we lost years ago—your baby brother, Damian ! Yes ! let him rest at Bradenshope."

"There is one difficulty," replied Walter ; "will not Giacinta require that the last offices should be performed by a priest of her own Church ? She is a zealous Catholic."

"I had not thought of that ; it is quite possible that her confessor, of whom she speaks so highly, will forbid her to lay the dead child in what he may deem unconsecrated ground, and with other funeral rites than those of Rome. That must be settled before we proceed to make any arrangement."

"As for the ground, it was consecrated long before the Reformation, and many a good Catholic is sleeping in the vaults of our old Arnhem Church ; but the service is another matter."

"We might, perhaps, get the priest from Temple Towerby to officiate. It cannot matter what is said over the lifeless dust ; and if it would be any comfort to the mother, I shall not object. Of course, no clergyman of our own communion would use any other form than that contained in the Book of Common Prayer. We will speak to Giacinta at once."

But no such difficulty arose. Giacinta was devoted but not bigoted ; she was quite willing that the service which had been read over her husband should suffice for her child. She had begun to cherish the idea of interment at Bradenshope, and it would have been a fresh pain had

the scheme not been carried out. And so it came to pass, that on the morning of one of the earliest spring days, Sir Paul, Walter, Giacinta, and Hilda, went to Bradenshope—where Giacinta was formally received as “Mrs. Braden,” to the infinite astonishment of all the servants who were not in the secret. Next day they went on to Arnhem, and in the evening, according to the ancient custom of the Bradens, the child was laid beside his father, and Giacinta stood by her husband’s grave.

“And this is Bradenshope!” she said to Hilda, to whom she opened her heart freely; “and he—my husband, Paolo—was heir to all this land! to Bradenshope and to Arnhem also, you say. Hilda, I am more and more convinced that he never meant that marriage at Rimesso to be a real marriage; he could never have brought me here to be his lady-wife. I was not fit to be a grand English signora, and for myself I do not grieve. But oh! why did he not leave me alone! I was a happy child when he first saw me, and danced with me at our vintage feast; why did he not leave me in my humble but happy estate! Alas! I was vain and foolish, and I deceived and rebelled against my mother. I am punished—bitterly, bitterly punished! I was not worthy to keep and train my little angel Paolo. God has taken him to Paradise, and it is well!”

On the third day they returned to London, to find Giuditta under restraint. Her mind had entirely given way, and she could no longer go free without danger to herself as well as to others. Her countrymen in Leicester Square had been very kind to her, and it was not the least of their kindnesses that they had promptly taken steps to place her in safe keeping. Sir Paul immediately offered to undertake all expenses, and it was decided that the unhappy woman should remain in England, in some asylum, where she would be well treated, and made as comfortable as her state permitted. She was under the impression that she had slain little Paolo with her own hand, and she went about crying mournfully, “His blood is on me! it is dragging me down to hell. I have killed my daughter’s child!”

And now arose the question of Giacinta’s future.

Would it please her to remain in England, or would she choose to return to her own country?

She decided without a moment's hesitation. "You have been all very good to me," she said, in her sweet, melancholy voice, to Hilda and Agnes. "I came expecting to find bitter and powerful enemies, and I found only the best and most generous of friends. I have had help and comfort where I expected to receive only persecution and contempt. I believe now that heretics are good, that they are true Christians worthy of heaven, in spite of what the priests of my Church say! There *must* be salvation out of that Church!—people who are full of love and charity, and who sincerely worship God, cannot be doomed to hell, although they will not kneel to our blessed Lady, nor call upon the saints! Yes, you have all been most kind, most dear, and I shall ever pray for you, and think of you with deep affection. But I cannot stay among you; I must go back to my own sunny land. Among my own mountains—if anywhere—I shall, perhaps, some day regain my peace of mind. I have written already to the Superior of the Convent of Santa Chiara; it is only a few miles to the south of Rimesso. I know the reverend mother well; she will receive me."

"Ah!" said Hilda, "do not make your home *there*, Giacinta; do not in the hour of sadness enter a living tomb. You might live near us, and be happy, I am sure."

"Not so," she replied. "Forgive me, you can scarcely judge; you are English, I am Italian; we are differently constituted. A convent life is not dreary to us; it is often a home of rest when other homes of earth have failed us, and I shall not make any vows till I am quite sure of my vocation."

And two days afterwards she came again to bid them all farewell; she was leaving England that same evening. She looked very sad, and so frail, that Hilda thought she would not long need any home, save a few feet of earth in the burying-ground of the sisterhood of Santa Chiara.

"Farewell!" she said, at parting. "Be happy! God bless you for ever and ever! Forget me if you can, and all the sorrow I have brought upon you. Or, if you do

think of me, say, 'She sinned and she has suffered—may she be forgiven!'"

"Nay, the sin was not so much yours——" began Agnes; but Giacinta interrupted her: "Yes, the sin of wilfulness! the sin of disobedience! I see it all now. When I am safe at Santa Chiara may I write to you?"

"We should be extremely disappointed if you did not. If we quite lose sight of you, it will be your own fault, Giacinta," said Christina. "I think, perhaps, you are right in returning to your own country and your own people; but, remember, there is a home awaiting you in England should you ever need it, or wish for it. Think well before you commit yourself to any irrevocable step, and ask God to guide you, and show you the best way. You are weary and worn now. I do not wonder. But strength will return, and hope and energy, for you are very young. Take no vows, lest in days to come you strive against them, and find, all too late, that you have cast from you the chance of happiness."

"I shall take no vows which are binding till I am sure of myself. Some vows I must make, if the cloister be my home; but they will only be temporary, and may be renewed at pleasure."

And then, with tears and embraces, they parted; and when the sun was setting, Giacinta looked her last on the land where she had suffered so much, glad to escape from it, and yet blessing it for the sake of those who had treated her with so much kindness, and thinking, too, of the graves in the little church among the everlasting hills, where her own dead were at rest. Twice or thrice she wrote from Santa Chiara, and then her letters ceased; and after awhile the Lady Abbess of the convent forwarded to Mr. Braden certain papers which were addressed to him. Giacinta had passed away from earth—all her griefs and pains were over. She had "left this world in the odour of sanctity, and fortified by the rites of the Church," the nun politely assured her heretic relatives. But this news did not reach Bradenshope till more than two years after her departure; and so Giacinta became to her husband's kindred only a name and a memory. Giuditta was still

living when last we heard of her. She was no longer violent, but her mind was shrouded in hopeless and apparently rayless gloom.

It was quite the middle of April before Emily and Philip Harwood were married. It was a very quiet wedding, for the shadow of recent events still hung over the house in Harley Street. But it was a lovely day, and they were true and loving friends who, striving to put the past behind them, smiled on the bridal pair.

"Sweet William" acquitted himself admirably, and made speeches at the breakfast, and paid compliments to the bridesmaids, as one to the manner born; and when it was all over, and he and "grannie" were alone together in Mrs. Dorothy's drawing-room, he said, "I like weddings; I shall be in a hurry to go to another. When will Cousin Hilda be married?"

"We have not exactly settled it," replied grannie; "but some time in June, I suppose. Everything is nearly ready, and Walter is getting impatient. We were speaking, yesterday, of Midsummer-day, but we agreed to let this wedding pass over before we made definite arrangements for another."

"When are we going back to Endlestone?"

"In about a fortnight; I want to get some things for Hilda, and to transact a little business with my old friend, Mr. Seeley. I am getting tired of London."

"And so am I; city life is not greatly to my taste, though I quite believe that one ought not to bury oneself entirely in the country, lest one should rust, or become 'blue-moulded,' for want of intercourse with the men and spirit of the times. An English country gentleman should come up to town once a year, at least; but his home should be among his own people, on his own estate. I am quite ready for Endlestone."

"And yet the London season is only just commencing — May and June are the grand months for town."

"Some day, perhaps, I may try them; I like the idea of seeing life under all sorts of aspects, and London life, at the height of the season, must be very full, and very broad, if not very deep. I say, grannie, what a lovely girl Agnes Braden is!"

"Dost thou think so, Willy?"

"I do, indeed! I think she is perfectly beautiful, and I am sure she is good. The bride is very pretty, and Christina—Miss Braden—is extremely handsome, no question about either of them. But Agnes is the 'queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls;' it is she who is 'queen lily and rose in one!'"

"Why, William, my grandson, thou hast surely fallen in love."

"I do believe I have! I really did not know it, though. I did it without meaning it, or thinking at all about it. But you remember you said, only the other day, that you wished me to marry early; and perhaps that put it into my head!"

"Likely enough! but it must go rather farther than thy head; if anything is to come of it, it must take possession of thy heart."

"The head will do, grannie, for it is my settled conviction that the affections are in the brain, and not at all in the cardiac region. Depend upon it, the emotions of the heart are purely physical, though, of course, it sounds romantic to talk of giving one's 'hand and heart.' But, seriously, grannie, you *do* like Agnes, do you not?"

"Seriously, I do, William. I like her very much, and if thou shouldst happen to love her, I doubt not but that I shall love her, also; though not precisely in the same way as thou wilt. Agnes Braden would, I am sure, be to thee a good, true wife, shouldst thou be so fortunate as to win her; but be not in too great haste, there are other maidens fair and good as she, and, perchance, thou mayest meet one who will suit thee better, and charm thee more."

"I think *not*, grannie. I do believe it was love at first sight. She looked like an angel bending over that poor child's couch, and trying to comfort the unfortunate Giacinta; and this morning—well! there was no one to compare to her, not even Cousin Hilda."

"That is according to thy opinion. Hilda has what I call much more *countenance* than Agnes; hers is—to my thought, at least—a higher type of beauty."

"I will not argue the point, grannie. 'Comparisons are odorous,' as Mrs. Malaprop says, but—

"'What care I how fair she be,
If she be not fair to me !'

I have no mind to go in for a three-volume sentimental novel, ending in blighted affection and resignation. I never had any sympathy with that world-renowned damsel who sat, like patience, on a monument. Of course, this is entirely between ourselves, grannie ! "

"Of course ! If the news of thy *penchant* travel any further, it will not be I who spread it. But, in all seriousness, my dear boy, I entreat thee to wait a little longer before thou makest any declaration of attachment."

"And leave the way open for some more lucky fellow ! Delay is dangerous, grannie dear ! "

"More haste, worst speed ! " since thou takest to aphorisms. Understand, however, Willie, that I have no doubt of Agnes Braden, but I would have thee more certain of thyself. At present I think thou hast no rival to dread, and the Bradens, like ourselves, go home in a few days. Mary Crosbie did invite Agnes to stay for several weeks, and go out with her, but for this year she declines. And once at Bradenshope she is safe from suitors, for awhile at least. As the summer advances you may see more of each other, and then if thou art still in the same mind, I shall not try to hold thee back."

The return to Endlestone, however, was made even more quickly than they had planned, for just a week had elapsed after the wedding when there came a letter from Mrs. Arnison, requesting Flossie to travel home immediately. Irene had suddenly become much worse, and the most serious apprehensions were entertained. "And if Hilda would accompany you," further wrote Mrs. Arnison, "I think it would be a great comfort to dear Irene. She has asked me several times how soon Aunt Dorothy might be expected at the Grey House, and, only yesterday, she begged of me to send for you, at the same time wondering whether Hilda would mind leaving town a little earlier than was arranged, adding, 'I do think Hilda would like to be with me now ; I am sure my time

is short.' I am not, however, so hopeless as your father and Cynthia are ; there seems to be so little the matter with her ; no actual disease, only this unaccountable weakness and sinking of the frame. We have had further advice,—Dr. Manby, who is reported to be so skilful in these singular cases of inexplicable decline, and his treatment certainly was beneficial—*for a little while!* The last few days have been unseasonably hot, and that, I feel sure, has told upon her sadly ; I trust, and I believe, that she will rally presently. But it is right you should know how very ill your sister really is, for unless I am greatly mistaken, you will not care to remain a day longer in Harley Street."

Flossie, almost drowned in tears, rushed to Hilda with her mother's letter. Agnes and Christina were packing her things, she said ; she had telegraphed to say she would take the train which arrived at Crabb's End at 7.30 in the evening ; could, and would, Hilda accompany her ?

"I may go, may I not, Aunt Dorothy?" pleaded Hilda. "You know all that Irene has been to me, and events have separated us so completely ever since last summer. I feel as if, for Walter's sake, I had been neglecting her. I am so glad I spent that month in the autumn at the Blue House. May I go with Flossie, auntie ? "

"Surely thou mayest, child. Just put up what thou needest, and I will follow to-morrow, or next day, with thy luggage ; Madame Marie can send her cases to Endlestone when the things are ready. Yes, Flossie, my dear, Hilda will be ready as soon as thou art."

And so it came to pass that in the fading twilight Hilda Capel once more stopped at the lonely little station on the Moorside, and saw before her the now familiar hills that lay around her quiet home. And there was Louis Michaud, with the waggonette, waiting for the travellers. He looked so grave and so sad, that the girls instinctively feared the worst.

"Oh, Louis!" cried Flossie, "what is it? How is she? She is not—*gone?*" The last word almost died upon her lips.

"No, dear, she is here still," he answered ; "but you are come none too soon ; she is sinking fast."

"I cannot—I cannot believe it!" sobbed poor Flossie.
"Mamma thought she might rally."

"She does not think so now ; there was a great change last night, after that letter was posted. I am so thankful you came at once ; and she has asked for you, Hilda, continually. And just before I set out to meet you, she said, 'I am persuaded that Hilda will be with Flossie !' Theodore returned last week, just for a flying visit, as he thought, being home-sick and mother-sick ; and the girls are telegraphed for."

It was quite dark when they got into the town, and heard the rushing of the river beneath the bridge, and listened to the evening chimes, and the curfew ringing from the ancient tower ; and there was Mr. Arnison, standing just outside his own gates, ready to welcome them. But, oh ! how different a welcome from that which had been anticipated !—how unlike all other welcomes they had either of them ever experienced !

Flossie was held tight to her father's heart, and he spoke no word ; Hilda felt his tears against her cheek ; the girls trembled as if the shadow of the grave itself compassed them.

Mrs. Arnison met them in the hall. She had left Irene sleeping, with Cynthia keeping watch ; and she made Flossie and Hilda refresh themselves with food, that they might regain their composure ere they saw the invalid.

Flossie was the first to visit the sick-chamber, but it was not very long before she came back to the dining-room, saying, "She asks for you, Hilda—come !"

All tremblingly, Hilda went, dreading she knew not what. She need not have feared. It was the same old Irene, with the old, sweet smile, and the calm, loving eyes, that lay upon the bed. She was so little altered, that Hilda could not believe that death was near at hand. There was a very slight flush on the wan cheek, and a light upon the face that looked like life ; as for the brow, it was fair and peaceful as ever. "Hilda darling !" said the soft, low voice. "I knew you would come, dear ! I hope I was not selfish ; I wanted you so much ! "

“It was I who was selfish, leaving you so long. But oh, Irene! I did not think you were so ill. I was afraid all the winter; but you had been sadly ailing before, they said, and I hoped you would be all right when the spring came again,—and perhaps you will be—yet.” And Hilda spoke almost imploringly, for the flush had died away into a mortal paleness, and the light had faded with the transient glow of welcome.

“No, dear,—no! God has spoken to my soul, and told me that this little earthly life of mine is done; and I am not afraid to go to Him. He tells me—I hear His voice—and I say with perfect content, ‘Yes, dear Lord, I come!’ Don’t cry, love! think how soon I shall be at home! think how many cares and pains are spared me! think of seeing *Christ* ‘face to face’ with no cloud between! You must not grieve, dear, for me; I was always a poor, weak thing, and I could never have borne the heat and burden of the day. God my Father is so good to me. My life has been one long, sweet, quiet sunshine, and it is sunshine to the last.”

“You do not wish to recover?”

“I know I cannot; I would try to wish it, if it were God’s will. But on the border-lands, Hilda, one does not want to turn back. Far off I can see the land of eternal spring.”

“‘There everlasting spring abides,’ ” said Hilda slowly.

“Yes, the ‘spring fulfilled,’ of which you and I have often talked. And the service I might not render my Lord on earth, I shall render there, I am persuaded. It is only for a little while that we must part, Hilda dear—only for a little while.”

CHAPTER XLIX.

"SO HE GIVETH HIS BELOVED SLEEP."

"The passing of the sweetest soul
That ever looked from human eyes."

To the last Irene Arnison was true to her name. "Child of Peace" she had ever been, even in her infancy and early youth; and now, in premature decay, she was emphatically so—calm, restful, bright, and filled with the peace which passeth all understanding. The end did not come as quickly as they had expected; she lingered on to the third week of May, suffering very little except from weakness, but so wasted and worn that often the least movement seemed more than the sinking frame could bear. Hilda was with her continually, and the two enjoyed many sweet seasons of pleasant intercourse. Irene was not one of those who, selfishly absorbed in themselves, profess to have "done with things of earth." There were silent hours when she could lie still, and anticipate the unfolding of the golden gates, when she could say with quiet thankfulness, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace!" but when her brothers and sisters came to her bedside, she did not talk of herself; she wanted to hear of their little schemes, and to know all their concerns. She questioned Theodore as to his life in Paris; she could listen with pleasure to the account the twins gave of their school-companions—girls whom she had never seen and never would see on this side of the grave; she liked Alice's baby to be laid by her on the bed, and it pleased her to hear of its infantile perfections, and of her sister's plans for its education. She had a good deal to say to Flossie about her future, when the two years of betrothal should be passed, and Louis and she should begin life together. She charm the little ones from a naughty mood into radiant

good temper, and even Jacky's droll lisplings and merry laugh would cheer, as long as she had strength to bear that young gentleman's rather noisy demonstrations.

But, above all, she liked to talk to Hilda about her life at Bradenshope—to listen to the sad story of Giacinta, and to picture her cousin's residence at Arnheim—Arnheim, where they had all been so happy on that summer day, so many months ago. That pleasant excursion had been Irene's last. “What a lovely day that was!” she said to Hilda one fair May evening, when, being rather stronger, they had laid her upon the couch, which always stood near her bed, and wheeled it into the broad bay-window, which commanded one of the finest views in Endlestone or its neighbourhood. “One of my greatest pleasures from a child was to spend the day at Arnheim; and once, when Agnes and Emily were children, and poor Paul and Walter had whooping-cough, they lived there for a whole month, and Flossie and I stayed with them all the time. It was a sort of Paradise to us, I think—those beautiful old gardens, and the ruined tower, with its wild Border-stories, and, above all, that delightful shore, with its rocks and sands, and that long mysterious vista of great shadowy mountains on the other side the Estuary. Ah, Hilda, what a dear old beautiful world this is!”

“And yet you do not grieve to go away from it?”

“Not now. I did feel some regret when first it was borne in upon my mind that my days on earth were drawing to a close. There was a little time last autumn when I felt sad at the thought of leaving all I loved, and going out of the world that had been so sweet and good to me; but very soon God comforted me by showing me that there were better things in store, and that, somehow, past, present, and future would all be bound together in one full, rich, and perfect whole. Then I could leave all with Him, certain that it would be well with me in life, in death, and in those unknown worlds beyond the grave. After all, life and death mean only so much, and no more, as applied to this earthly existence.”

“I have heard you say you do not believe in death.”

“And I do not!—now that it is close upon me, less

than ever! It is not *I* who am dying; it is only the mortal tabernacle of the flesh sinking into decay. My life is not really ebbing, though this poor body grows weaker and frailer every hour; the falling, crumbling tenement and the tenant are quite separate existences. Hilda darling, when it is with you as it is with me, let it comfort you to remember how sweetly my Father encompassed me with His peace and rest; how His arms were around me; and how, through the mists and chills of what we call death, I could feel His hand gently leading me into the valley that seems so dark at this end of it, and hear His voice saying, ‘Trust thyself to Me, My child, thy portion is life and light eternal.’”

“And I think, Irene, as the mortal darkness thickens and deepens, you will hold more closely still the hand that guides you into the land of rest.”

“Or the hand will hold mine! In my weakness, you know, I might let it go, if the clasp were mine only. But held by God Himself, I am safe, for that hand never yet loosed any poor trembling, failing soul. And I have always felt God with me, ever since I could remember.”

“And yet, dear, human nature does shrink from death.”

“Not when it comes, I think. God makes all that straight; one does not want to go to bed and sleep when the sun is shining, and the birds singing, and all the world is full of active life; but when it grows dusk and chill, and the curtains of the dark draw themselves about us, we go naturally and thankfully to rest. ‘So He giveth His beloved sleep.’”

“I have heard of people wanting, and even longing, to die.”

“That cannot be quite right, I think. What should we say of our servants, if they wanted to go to bed at noon tide! We are here to tend the vines, I suppose, till the Great Master says, ‘Leave thy work below, My child; I have other tasks for thee elsewhere!’ Death, or what we call so, cannot come too soon, for it is the Master’s call; it cannot be too long delayed, for God knows when the sheaves are ready to be gathered in.”

“Yet some lives seem prolonged when they are utterly useless. How often is the ardent worker laid low in the

flower of his days, while the cumberer of the ground flourishes to extreme old age. There is old Mrs. Tillett wearing out her luckless daughters and all about her with incessant grumbling and unreasonable demands upon their time and patience. She does no earthly good—nobody appears to remember *any* good that she has ever done, and yet, there she vegetates at eighty-five, while her grandson, whom everybody mourns, dies in his thirtieth year. It is very mysterious."

"Don't you think a useless life may be prolonged for the discipline of others? God may let some people live on in order that the faith and patience of some other people may be perfected; then, as to the early removal of those whose lives are invaluable by reason of the work they are doing, and the influence they exercise on all around them, we must remember that God can raise up whom He will to fill even the most important posts; and for those whom He takes, He has doubtless higher and nobler work in store. Depend upon it, this is not the only world in which the Master requires active and faithful service. What has been begun here may be continued, one knows not where! Only we are sure that all worlds, even though there be myriads, and not this earth alone, are the Lord's, and neither time nor space can part us from Him in whom we live and move and have our being."

"Irene, there is one question I should so like to ask."

"What is it, dear?"

"I want to know what is your idea of heaven."

"I have none. I cannot in the least guess what awaits me on the other side the grave; and I am more than content to remain in ignorance—to wait the lifting of the veil. I believe that God has prepared for me such good things as pass man's understanding. But what sort of good things I do not know, and do not care to know. It is quite enough that *He knows.*"

"I do believe some people imagine that when they get to heaven they will stay there for ever and ever *in statu quo*, walking up and down the golden streets in white garments, with crowns of gold upon their heads and palms in their hands, doing nothing but sing anthems

and congratulate themselves and each other on being there at all ! ”

“ Don’t you think that one’s conceptions of heavenly bliss depend very much upon one’s individual ideas of happiness ? It seems to me the beauty of the Bible description is that it gives some vision of joy and fruition to all kinds of natures, the lower as well as the higher—rest for the weary, food for the hungry, health for the sick, all tears wiped away ; for those whose aspirations are less material, the face of the Lord Himself, and eternal, untiring, devoted service. ‘ And His servants shall serve Him, and they shall see His face.’ ”

“ Yes ; it is enough to know so much. And it is very sweet to feel that imperfect service here may be supplemented there ; that all pure and holy beginnings may have there a full completion ; that life, in fact, commences here, and goes on and on there, growing nobler and fuller, for ever and for ever ; that life, death, and the great eternity may be—as the dear Charles Kingsley says—‘ one grand, sweet song ! ’ ”

“ Just so ; we write only the first chapters of our lives here, I am persuaded ; but on that early writing, oh ! how much depends ! Hilda, I have one favour to beg of you.”

“ Ask it ; I think I may say beforehand that it will be granted.”

“ Your marriage is fixed for next month—is it not ? ”

“ Not quite definitely. June has been spoken of all along—the end of June, I suppose—but nothing was absolutely settled when I left London.”

“ Still, I am sure you have both counted on June, and Aunt Dorothy has made her preparations accordingly. Now, I want you to promise me that you will not, on my account, defer Walter’s happiness.”

“ I will not, if he should press for it. But I think he will choose to wait a little. We are young, and life, according to appearances, is before us ; we need not be in any hurry. I should not like my marriage-bells to ring with the echo of your funeral knell still sounding in my ears.”

“ Ah, that tolling bell ! It does sound sorrowfully to

the mourners, I know—I have felt it myself when some of our neighbours have been buried. But papa and mamma have both promised me that there shall be no ‘trappings of woe’ when this forsaken husk of mine is put into the ground. My Sunday-class will carry me—or what once was me, rather—to the grave, and I dare say they will throw some flowers upon my coffin. I wonder if I shall be there to see it, looking on lovingly at those who must ever be so dear to me, yet rejoicing in my own freedom from the bonds of earth ! ”

“ How little even the wisest of us can know of our state of being when once the other side is reached ! Irene, let me thank you once for all I owe to you—for all that you have taught me.”

“ I was but repeating the teaching of my father and mother, dear. I only said over again what I had heard from them many a time. What a blessing their wise training has been to me—to all of us ! I should think nobody *could* have a more Christian father and mother than we have had. Next to God’s best gift of His Son, our Lord and Saviour, I thank Him for the dear, tender, holy-living parents He has bestowed upon me. Their exalted Christianity has been the most impressive of lessons ; their brightness, their sweetness, their utter unselfishness alone, would have made me wish to serve their God and follow them as they followed Christ.”

“ When I first came among you, Irene, nothing struck me so much as the atmosphere of quiet happiness that seemed, as it were, to brood over all the household, and I soon perceived that this calm, yet joyous spirit, emanated from the elders, and I said to myself, ‘ These people live to God, and therefore they are happy ; why should I not also be happy ? Why should I not be as sweet as Alice, as gay as Flossie, as peaceful as Irene ? ’ Ah ! there are no sermons to be compared with those which a truly consistent, happy Christian life preaches. *Cant* always makes me angry ; I feel I *can’t* listen to it ! ”

“ What do you mean by ‘ *cant* ’ ? ”

“ Perhaps I make use of a wrong word, but I mean religious, or so-called religious, expression, without *practical*

piety. There is Barker—it makes one sick to listen to her, and the older she grows the worse she gets. She is always talking about 'living only to this world'—a pet phrase, I believe, with people of her kind; so the other day Aunt Dorothy said, 'I tell thee what, Barker—folks may read their Bible and pious books from morning till night, and they may dress like Quakers, and never go to any place of amusement, and they may *talk* religion by the yard, and yet live entirely to this world, or rather to *a* world, and that the miserable world of their own downright, detestable, self-centred *selfishness!*' And there is old Mrs. Tillett; she is continually saying how she wishes God's will to be done, that she has no will but His, &c., &c., *ad nauseam*; while all the time she grumbles and moans over her infirmities, and looks as dismal as a death's head! She talks of no one but herself, she cares absolutely nothing for anybody's concerns. She makes no one creature's happiness. She pores over her Bible and gets out of it nothing but gloom and self-love and a wretched self-complacency which is content with holding certain opinions that she calls '*the truth*', without making the smallest attempt to *live* the truth out in her daily life. It is very shocking, and she so aged."

"Don't be too severe on her, poor old soul; she has always been a miserable woman. Her idol has been self, and, like other idols, it fails and ceases to give satisfaction. I dare say she means well, and so does Barker. Some people get a crook in early life; perhaps they are born with a crook, and they walk in the shadow and grope their way always. But the dear Lord makes allowances for them; if there is ever such a little bit of good in their hearts, *He* sees it, and holds it as a seed that may blossom and flourish when transplanted to another soil. Yet I must own that had Mrs. Tillett been my mother, I should probably have been little better than an infidel. In recoil from spurious Christianity one is sadly apt to despise the genuine article."

"That is very true. Oh, Irene, I trust God may deliver me from the fearful snare of *talking* about 'His will,' while I am not seeking to fulfil it; that I may be enabled to bear brightly all He may see fit to lay upon me, and to do

His will in the spirit of love and cheerful obedience. If ever I am tempted to repine when laid on a couch of sickness and conscious of decay, I shall try to think of you, Irene, and of your quiet submission to your heavenly Father's will."

" Ah, but, Hilda, I have really no submission to make—at least, not now; I mean it in my very soul when I declare that God's will is mine, and that I lie in His dear hands as contentedly as ever I lay in my mother's tender arms."

" I believe it. I see that you are at rest; I know that you are as contented as any smiling baby at its mother's breast. But if you only prated of patience and resignation, and all the while murmured and looked gloomily, and talked only of yourself and your illness, I should not believe it. I shall always thank God for the sermon you have preached me by your brightness and happy patience, and your abounding interest in the earthly life that still lies around you."

" As for that, it seems to me that a Christian is bound to live in the world till he leaves it, and to do his part there, in one way, if not in another; besides, how can one help caring for every little thing that pertains to those who are dear to us? It fills me with joy to see Alice's baby; I love to hear of Flossie's little plans, and yours; I like the children to show me their dolls, and tell me about their fresh plays; I like to be told the news of the town, and public news of the day always interests me. Why should it not? Why should I be absorbed in myself because I am going to God?"

" Some good people would say you ought to think only of God, in whose awful presence you must so soon appear."

" And so I do think of Him, for God is in all these things that occupy my attention. He is in life as well as in death; in the seen as well as in the unseen; in this pleasant world which He has made for His glory, as well as in the heaven of heavens, wherever or whatever that may be! There is a deep truth in the lines:—

" ' He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small.' "

"I understand. Every bit of daily life is, or may be, grand and holy."

"I think a child's innocent play may be as pleasing to God as an archangel's adoration. And, if seeming trifles are worthy *His* consideration, surely they commend themselves to us who dwell among them, even though we are standing on the threshold of eternity. Our duty here is to our fellow-creatures, and it is duty to the very end of life. Of course, there will be new duties on the other side—God will show them to us when we get there."

All that day Irene had been wonderfully better, and all the next day the improvement continued. Even her mother thought, "Can she be so very ill as we have believed? May there not be a change? While there is life there is surely hope!"

And the sisters whispered to each other, "She *may* get well again, after all. Her voice is quite strong again, and she sat up nearly half the morning!"

"She arranged the flowers that Agnes Braden brought her, with her own hands," said Cynthia.

"And she put my knitting right," cried Octa, "just as she used to do."

"And she was quite excited about the new peacock-blue that Louis has got at last, after so many failures," remarked Flossie. "Another person might have said, 'It is nothing to me *now!*'"

"Ah," replied Cynthia, "she would never say anything was nothing to her that was something to any of us. She will go right into heaven thinking of everybody but herself."

But Hilda, though she could not find it in her heart to dash those fond, vain hopes, was not deceived, and Aunt Dorothy could not forbear saying to Mrs. Arnison, "Dear Rose, do not delude thyself; there will be but one change more, and that the last. Didst thou never see a dying candle flash up to brilliancy just before it sank and expired in the socket? It is often so with this earthly life of ours; it is a last effort of decaying nature. The light that is on that dear child's face is the light 'that never was on sea or land.' Heaven's unclouded sunshine will soon be hers."

And so, indeed, it proved. A few more hours, and the transient glow of life had faded, the fitful pulse had sunk, the fair young head lay motionless upon the pillow, and the gentle hands lay listlessly on the counterpane. Death came as naturally and sweetly to Irene as any other part of her mortal existence. One of the last things she said was, "My life has been all sunshine—one long, sweet sunshine—ever since I can remember; and now God calls me to something better still."

She had a smile and a whispered word of love for all who were about her, and as the dying pallor settled on the placid face, it grew calmly radiant. Death came so quietly, so pleasantly, that they who watched the great change scarcely knew when the end came. But they looked, and the white eyelids had ceased to quiver, and from the parted lips there came no fluttering breath; the frail tabernacle of the flesh was deserted, the lovely soul had gone home to God; and father and mother and sisters could only say, "So He giveth His beloved sleep."

Early in the morning, before the household was astir, Hilda went to the chamber of death to take a last farewell of that sweet presence which they still called Irene Arnison. The May morning had dawned serenely, and the sunbeams fell brightly through the half-closed venetians on the white-covered bed on which the still form lay. It was the first time that Hilda had ever gazed on death, and she trembled as she unclosed the chamber-door. One look, and she feared no longer. Perfect peace was on the quiet brow, and she thought involuntarily of the sacred words, "As for me, I shall be satisfied when I awake in Thy likeness."

"Good-bye, darling," said Hilda, as she kissed the cold lips that could no longer respond to hers, all warm and glowing with youthful life. "I thank God for your sweet life, and all its blessed teachings, and I thank Him, too, for your holy dying. May He give me grace to live out all the lessons you have taught me; may mine never be a dead faith which contents itself with bare words. Let the truths I hold be *living* truths, not mere lifeless doctrines confined to the sepulchre of an unloving, selfish

soul. If I may, I will follow in your steps, Irene; your people shall be my people, and your God my God! Once more, good-bye, dear, dear love, till we meet again in some happier land beyond the grave. Death is a cruel spoiler—that is, to us who remain—and sin casts its shadows on us all; but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

A few more days, and Irene was laid in her last resting-place beneath the hills, with the trees she loved waving pleasantly all around; and the birds sang cheerily, and the river murmured softly, and the daisies in the emerald-green turf lifted their smiling eyes to the bright sunshine, and to the deep blue, unclouded sky, when the mourners left the grave-side, and returned to the home which it had pleased God to darken by sore bereavement. And a voice seemed to whisper to those sorrowful hearts—

“ Then pass, ye mourners, cheerly on,
Through prayer, unto the tomb; -
Still, as ye watch life’s falling leaf,
Gathering from every loss and grief,
Hope of new spring and endless home.

“ Then cheerly to your work again,
With hearts new-braced and set,
To run, untir’d. love’s blessed race,
As meet for those who, face to face,
Over the grave their Lord have met.”

CHAPTER L.

THE END OF THE CHRONICLE.

“ So more and more a Providence
Of love is understood,
Making the springs of time and sense
Sweet with eternal good.”

THE day after the funeral Hilda returned to the Grey House. Walter, who had been in London attending to various concerns, came over from Bradenshope the same evening. All was now ready for the marriage; the settle-

ments only awaited the necessary signatures ; the *trousseau* was on the point of completion, and Arnheim wanted nothing but its mistress. But though Irene had begged Hilda not to defer her bridal on her account, she could not bear to contemplate the event while the shadows still rested so heavily on the family at the Blue House ; nor could Walter himself urge the fulfilment of her promise, under the mournful circumstances. If the wedding took place at the time appointed, it was impossible that any of the Arnisons should be present, and without her aunt and her uncle and her beloved cousins Hilda felt that, in spite of her joy and pride in her bridegroom, there would be a certain incompleteness in the whole affair.

"Walter," she began, when they were alone together in the old-fashioned garden ; "the month of roses is close at hand."

"As if I could possibly forget that !"

"And are you expecting me to keep my promise without fail ?"

"Why should I not ? Is it for Irene's sake you falter ? You know she earnestly desired that our union should not on her account be postponed. At one time, I believe—Cynthia tells me so, at least—she thought of requesting us to choose an earlier day, that she might, if possible, hear our wedding-bells. And we might be married very quietly."

"That could scarcely be, either at Bradenshöpe or at Endlestone ; every man, woman, and child will know exactly the day and the hour. Besides, though I protest against any fashionable display, I should not like to celebrate the greatest event of my life without the honours due to the occasion. Nor would it please your own family, I am convinced ; your father has planned a grand entertainment of the tenantry, and the school children at Endlestone and at Bradenshöpe have been promised some kind of *fête*. As for Aunt Dorothy—led, of course, by Cousin William—she contemplates all sorts of hospitalities—a regular hanging-out of the broom, I am led to understand. I should not wonder if the pigs were to have a *gala* of their own ! I should not be surprised if I heard that the cows were to have their horns gilded, and

their tails ornamented with white bows ! No, Walter ; we cannot reasonably expect to be married like common folk. Are not you the heir of Bradenshope, and am not I the niece of the lady of the Manor ? ”

“ Now, really, Hilda, I did not think you were so conceited ! ”

“ Conceited or not, you must admit the force of what I say. We could not keep the thing quiet if we would, and we ought not for others' sakes, if we could. As Christina said, ‘ The heir of the Bradens must be married as becomes his dignity.’ ”

“ I should like all the world to come to my wedding, and applaud my choice ; I want my marriage-day to be a day of rejoicing wherever the names of Braden and Capel are known. My father and mother mean to keep open house, and receive royally, as the inauguration, as they firmly trust, of a new and happier era.”

“ Wherefore, my dear Walter, we must wait a little longer. Don't be vexed with me, don't think I dread to come to you as your own ; but how could our happiness be complete without the Blue House people ? And how could they bear just yet to join in any festal gathering ? How, indeed, could we ask it of them ? Please, dear, grant me this one favour—loose me from my promise for June, and wait patiently and happily a little longer.”

“ How much longer ? ”

“ Three months. Grant me that delay, and I will ask no more. I will certainly be ready by the end of September. And then I think Flossie and the twins might be among my bridesmaids. The Arnisons never stand upon bare form and ceremony, I know ; they would put off their mourning for one day, and wear white, I am sure ; they would feel that they were only doing as dear Irene herself would wish. And aunt and uncle care very little for outward signs of mourning. I think they will be with us in September, if we do but wait till then ; they will grieve none the less for their ‘ child of peace ’ that they rejoice with us at our marriage feast.”

“ What does Aunt Dorothy think ? ”

“ She thinks just as I do. In fact, we have talked it all over, and she feels with me that a postponement is

unavoidable. And three months will soon be past, Walter dear ! It would be such a pity to spoil the happiest day of our lives, would it not ? And spoiled it would be, if we were to wed now,—that is within a month, with the gloom of recent loss shadowing all the brightness, though not pressing out the sweetness from our joy."

And what could Walter do but yield ? especially when Aunt Dorothy joined her suit to Hilda's, remarking, "Thou art still young, Walter—my nephew, as I deem thee now—and Hilda is but a girl, and, please the good Lord, you will have many, many years of wedded happiness, even though three months be taken from the whole period. You may well give this short space of time to decent mourning and chastened grief for her who is not dead, but gone before. Our Hilda spoke well when she said that a marriage so happy and so blessed as thine and hers promises to be, should not be solemnised under the shadow of a recent bereavement. Thou shouldst honour her, that she cannot, even for thee, sacrifice her duty and her love to the kindred who gave her so kind a welcome to their midst not two years ago. And Irene was very precious to her ; it was dear Irene's sweet talk and holy life that first led her to yearn for, and so to seek, that peace which passeth understanding. Thy beloved Hilda was a charming heathen, Walter, when first she came among us. Poor child ! it was a marvel she was so pure and so good, seeing that she was bred up a mere shallow worldling, and had never been taught the simplest lessons which Christian parents teach their children. Thou, too, owest somewhat to Irene Arnison, and it is only fit that thou shouldst respect her memory, and fulfil for her those days of mourning which are due."

Sir Paul and Lady Braden were content to countenance the delay, though it interfered somewhat with their arrangements ; for Lady Braden and Mrs. Arnison were old and tried friends, and "Letty" could no more rejoice while "Rosa" was sorrowful, than Hilda could be glad while the grass was not yet green on Irene's quiet grave. Christina, too, entirely coincided in the temporary delay, and Agnes was fully convinced by Sweet William that all was for the best. And so it was agreed on all hands

that the wedding should take place with due honours in the last week of September.

None of them regretted the decision, as that pleasant summer passed swiftly and calmly away; even Walter, though manifesting occasionally something of a lover's impatience, could not but confess how happily they all were waiting. Early in June Mary Sandys came to the Grey House to remain with Hilda for the rest of her maiden days, and Mrs. Dorothy thought her so charming that she began to wonder whether William Rivers might not be tempted from his allegiance to Agnes Braden, to whom he had not yet proposed. "I see thou admirest Mary very much," she said one day to her grandson.

"Almost as much as I admire Hilda," he replied, "and with the same kind of admiration. Miss Sandys is a sweet girl, and as good as gold, I feel assured, and may Providence send her as good a husband as she deserves; but don't fancy, grannie dear, that I wish to be the favoured individual. Mary charms me, but Agnes subdues me; Mary calls forth my admiration and my esteem, Agnes fills my heart with fervent love. I know now, beyond all doubt, that Agnes Braden is the one woman in all the world for me; she only I desire, and she I will win, if God please, or my name is not William Rivers! This lovely summer-time is just the season for love's young dream; it must be very pleasant to go a-wooing in such delightful weather. I feel quite inclined to know my fate at once, grannie; I think I will ask her before the hay is down."

"Didst thou ever hear the couplet—

" 'There's nothing on earth like making love,
Save making hay in fine weather!' ?

It seems to me that thou art minded to combine the two experiences, grandson William! Well, I have no objection. Go to-day, and ask thy Agnes if thou wilt, and may God speed thy wooing."

And "Sweet William" needed no further bidding. He went off that very afternoon to Bradenshope, and formally requested Sir Paul's permission to address his daughter Agnes. The baronet gave free and ready consent; William

Rivers was in every way a suitable match for a Miss Braden, and it would be very pleasant to have one daughter settled in the immediate neighbourhood, Mary and Emily being so far away.

Very late that night Mr. Rivers returned—so late, that all at the Grey House were gone to bed, save Mrs. Dorothy herself. The young man's face told the old lady that he had not been unsuccessful in his wooing; nevertheless, she accosted him with, "How hast thou sped, dear boy?"

To which he replied, "I have secured you a granddaughter—the most eligible of grand-daughters—my blessed old grannie! Some time next year—in the spring, I hope—I am to bring Agnes Rivers to the Grey House! I gave Sir Paul to understand how fully *you* approved my choice, and that went a good way with him, I can tell you! And Agnes herself—I am not quite positive but that she accepts me less as William Rivers than as the beloved grandson of Mrs. Dorothy Capel, of High Endlestone."

"Thou art a good-for-nothing flatterer, my Sweet William! But, anyhow, I am glad that thou shouldest have Agnes Braden for thy wife. Hilda being already disposed of, there is no one more suitable for thee than she, and in some ways, I am not sure but that Agnes will be more thy complement than Hilda even."

"I am persuaded of it! Hilda is lovely and good, but Agnes is loveliness itself and goodness itself; besides, she loves me, which Hilda does not. Everything considered, I think I prefer Agnes."

"A very good thing that thou dost, seeing that Hilda is unattainable. Now, then, thou and Agnes, assisted by Hilda and Walter, can set to at the hay as soon as ever it is down, and ye can try how hay-making and love-making go together."

"Gloriously, I should say; I'll tell you, grannie, as soon as ever I have made the experiment."

It is enough to say that the hay-making time passed very pleasantly, though I could scarcely venture to affirm that much hay was really made by the lovers, especially when Hilda and Walter were assisting. Barnes laughed at the amateur hay-making, and informed his wife that

the young people's services—Mr. Rivers included—were “more muddle than yield.”

On the first day they insisted on sharing in the regulation bread and cheese and beer; on the second, Sweet William produced a private luncheon-basket, and under shelter of a shady wood feasted the quartette on pigeon-pie, Madeira cake, and sparkling Moselle! A long *siesta* followed, and the affianced couples only resumed their rakes when the tired labourers were preparing to quit the field.

Arnhem received sundry finishing touches, and early in September was pronounced to be “altogether perfect.” The days and weeks had flown so swiftly that at last the wedding-day seemed suddenly to loom upon them unawares. But all was in readiness, and the Arnisons did not object to taking their part in the festivities. The bridesmaids were Mary Sandys, Christina and Agnes, Flossie, and the twins, Lily and Rose. Cynthia, who was rather disappointed at not being included in the fair sisterhood, was consoled by Agnes Braden, who bespoke her services as bridesmaid on the occasion of her own forthcoming marriage, which was to take place early in the ensuing summer. Hilda had chosen as her maid her faithful former attendant, little Patty, and she arrived at the Grey House just a fortnight before the wedding, very much to her own satisfaction, and greatly to the annoyance of Mrs. Barker, who disapproved of interlopers on principle, and cherished a rooted enmity towards all young people, on account of their presumed arrogance and inexperience. Patty's bright face and her dainty little ways displeased Mrs. Verjuice on the first evening of their acquaintance, and she pronounced her to be “a silly, little, forward London minx, with no brains, and vanity enough for half-a-dozen girls!” Perhaps Patty was just a little vain, for she was scarcely one-and-twenty, very pretty and very clever, and the Grey House servants made much of her, and regarded her as quite a fashionable town-lady. But her pride in her mistress was excessive, and Hilda knew her truth and fidelity of old. Almost from the commencement of her engagement, Miss Capel had resolved that Patty should share her bright-

ened fortunes, should travel with her on the bridal tour, and afterwards, if she were willing, form one of the newly-constituted household at Arnhem Towers.

The last evening of Hilda's maiden life arrived. Walter was absolutely driven away, together with Sweet William, soon after tea, on the plea that the bride and one of her bridesmaids would be practically inaccessible if the gentlemen remained, and there were various small matters yet to be settled, even at the eleventh hour. It was the 29th September, and the days were shortening rapidly. The twilight closed in, and the lamps were lighted quite early in the evening; but the glorious harvest-moon arose soon after eight o'clock, and shed its broad, mellow beams over lawn and field, brightening the wavy heather-blossomed moors, and showing clear against a crystal sky the long line of fells and the dark outline of the majestic woods that lay between Bradenshope and High Endlestone.

"Let us elope," said Hilda to Miss Sandys, as about nine o'clock they found themselves alone near the open back-hall door. "There will be neither supper nor worship for another hour. We shall not be really wanted, and I should so enjoy a moonlight walk and one more gossip with you. Hilda Capel may surely please herself for the short span of liberty which remains to her. Tomorrow evening Mrs. Braden must obey her lord and master."

"Many women would demur to that title," observed Mary, when, well shawled and hooded, they were at some little distance from the house; "why should the husband be master, any more than the wife be mistress?"

"The wife should be mistress, of course; but the mistress comes naturally and properly a little below the master. Mary, if my husband were not my master, I know I should in my heart of hearts despise him," was Hilda's proud reply.

"Then the mistress should be very careful to choose only a master whom she can truly acknowledge as such."

"That is understood, of course. And Mary, love makes obedience easy and pleasant. Take my advice, and never accept a man whom you may find it difficult to obey.

Wives are sometimes obliged to take the upper hand, I know, but that is not a happy household where the natural order of things is, perforce, reversed."

And then the girls spoke of their old life together in London, and Mary, with some little hesitation, mentioned Horace Trelawny. "I wonder how he will receive the news of your marriage?"

"It can be nothing to him," calmly replied Hilda; "he broke the tie himself. Oh! how thankful I am that he did so break it! To have missed Walter, and to have been Mr. Trelawny's wife, would indeed have been a misfortune. Thank God for all those bitter lessons! Thank God for all He took away, and for all that He has so bountifully given! Who would regret a leasehold pleasure, when freehold joys replace it!"

Hilda's wedding-day was lovely as late September days so often are. "And everything went off beautifully!" people said, from the early breakfast, taken promiscuously, to the throwing of innumerable old shoes, and the scattering of "pounds of rice," as the newly-married people drove away to the Crabb's End railway station at four o'clock in the afternoon.

"And now there is no such person as Miss Capel," said Agnes, demurely, to Mr. Rivers.

"And we have a daughter Hilda, and there is a Mrs. Braden of Arnheim once more," whispered Lady Braden to her husband.

It was a month later, and Mr. and Mrs. Braden, still on their wedding tour, found themselves, one afternoon, at a well-known hotel at Munich. There was just time to rest for half-an-hour, to dress, and to go down to the *table d'hôte*, and there, at some distance from the new arrivals, on the opposite side of the long oval board, Hilda saw a long-unseen, but well-remembered face—that of her aunt and quondam guardian, Mrs. Mowbray.

"What brings her here, I wonder?" said Walter, rather crossly; "of course you will just bow to her, Hilda; you will not resume your intimacy?"

"Not exactly," was the reply; "but I am too happy, dear, to feel at feud even with my cruel enemy, if such there be. And she was no enemy, she only served herself

—she knew no better, poor thing; she never enjoyed what I call the blessed life of Endlestone. There never was any quarrel between us, nor any positive estrangement; she simply threw me over when, no longer a source of emolument, I became a real incumbrance."

After dinner the aunt and niece met, and Mrs. Mowbray would fain have gushed over Hilda, who, as Mrs. Braden, was a most desirable person to cultivate, and to call one's niece.

"And you never even let me know that you were *engaged*!" said Mrs. Mowbray, reproachfully; "oh! fie, you naughty girl!"

"You never wrote to me; you 'washed your hands of me!' How could I suppose that you would be interested in hearing of my welfare? I thought you meant what you said."

"My dearest, a cruel fate separated us; but you know, Hilda, I *always* loved you. Ah, if you knew how cruelly I suffered on your account, my love!"

Hilda let her aunt tell her own story, but Mrs. Mowbray's hollowness was now apparent. "I should like to be good to her, but at a distance," said Mrs. Braden to her husband; "if she need a helping hand, I will give it willingly; but close friends and intimates we can never be again. We have been diverging ever since we parted; now we are leagues apart! the bonds that were so painfully snapped two years ago can never again be riveted while life lasts."

And when Mrs. Mowbray, with what she called her irresistible smile, proposed to accompany the Bradens to London, and pay her niece an early visit at Arnheim, she was politely but firmly repulsed. "I am vexed beyond measure," she said afterwards to one of her lady allies at Baden-Baden; "I am sure I only acted with common prudence in getting rid of my niece, when her wretched father made such a mess of it. So dreadfully disgraceful, you know! Who would have thought that cross-grained old maid Dorothy would contrive so good a match for her! And mixing with those vulgar Arnisons, too! It's inexplicable; and the Bradens of Bradenshope are as good a family as any in England. I wish I had

kept up a correspondence, but really it seemed so useless. To tell the truth, I never expected to hear of Hilda Capel again; I thought she would marry some rustic or other—a poor curate, or obscure attorney, perhaps; and in such case I could not have been expected to acknowledge her."

In London Hilda was introduced to the Poinsetts, and through them to Lord and Lady Polperro. She and Violet had a little private conversation all to themselves, and it transpired that Horace was somewhere in America, and that he had gone thither to be free of his angry creditors; for the Earl positively refused to impoverish himself and his heirs any further for a son who only squandered what he gave, and showed no signs of repentance or of reformation. He had been on the eve of marriage with a vulgar woman some years older than himself, but possessed of a very handsome fortune; his impecunious state and his dissipated habits being, however, disclosed to her, she refused to ratify the engagement, and the baffled spendthrift was once more thrown on his own resources. His father continued to allow him three hundred pounds a-year—"a mere paltry pittance," as he angrily declared, on which a gentleman could only starve genteelly. The annual income melted like butter in the sun as soon as it was received; if the three hundred had been three thousand it would have been just the same, as the Earl of Camelford and Lord Polperro knew right well.

A few more weeks, and there was a happy homecoming. Mr. and Mrs. Braden spent their Christmas at Bradenshope, but early in the New Year took up their residence at Arnheim, where they still spend the best part of their time, hoping that many years may yet elapse before they are summoned to Bradenshape and its responsibilities. Lady Braden is still delicate, for she has never recovered from the dreadful shock she sustained in the suicide of her misguided son; but Sir Paul seems to have taken a new lease of life, and may probably live to a good old age. He rejoices in his grandchildren, Paul and Walter, and a sweet baby-girl who bears the hallowed name of Irene. Nor are these—the inmates of

the Arnheim nursery—Sir Paul's only grandchildren; Mrs. Crosbie has one only son, and Mrs. Harwood has several little ones. As for Mrs. Dorothy, it is difficult to say whether she is prouder of Hilda's or of Agnes' children. It is well that Mrs. Verjuice is pensioned off and relegated to a neat little cottage on the estate, for she "never could abide children," she amiably declares, and she "always pitied fools of women who cumbered themselves with husbands!" Two excellent reasons why she had eschewed matrimony, as she frequently affirmed. Some of her old companions were uncharitable enough to smile, and suggest that it was only a case of the very sourest grapes.

The Grey House now is almost as cheerful as the Blue House. William and his Agnes are one of the happiest of happy married couples. He is still "Sweet William," and she is the same bright, true-hearted, sensible Agnes as ever. Like the Bradens of Arnheim, they have three children—two fine boys, and a pretty little creature, called after her great-grandmother, the lady of the Manor. So at last there is a real Dorothy Rivers. The boys are "Edward Capel" and "William Capel."

Mrs. Dorothy is now almost eighty, but she still trots about her farm, and visits her pigs, and prescribes for her sick cows; though Mr. Rivers is practically at the head of the whole concern, and he has pretty well doubled the value of the estate—so people say. "Grannie" has entirely given the reins into his hands; she is quite content to amuse herself with the children and with her pet animals. Her whole nature was sweetened and mellowed by that memorable Canadian sojourn, and William cannot be brought to believe that she was once hard and stern, though she shakes her head and tells him that she was a disagreeable old cross-patch up to the time that Hilda came to live at the Grey House—a certain proof that "It is never too late to mend."

Mr. Arnison talks of retiring partially from the business, and leaving all onerous duties to his son Theodore, and his son-in-law, Louis Michaud. M. Michaud, the elder, is dead, and Cynthia is married. Nor ought we to close these chronicles of Endlestone without stating that

Mrs. Jessie White expired at an advanced age, dying a natural death—it is believed, of undue corpulence. Her descendants, to the tenth and twelfth generation, are still the boast of Mrs. Dorothy.

In the sixth year of Hilda's marriage, being for a few weeks in London, she wandered one bright summer morning into Kensington Gardens, with her little son Paul trotting at her side. Almost unconsciously she strolled on, listening to her boy's prattle, till she reached the spot where she had stood with Horace Trelawny, just eight years before. The dusky red of the Palace walls showed between the spreading chestnut branches, and the waters sparkled in the sun. Everything was the same, only her whole life was changed. She was Hilda Capel no longer, and Horace Trelawny was only remembered with a pity which it was hard to keep unmixed with contempt.

She looked at her bonny boy, as he laughed up in her face, and asked her to go with him to the water's edge; but before she left the place, she covered her face with her hands and prayed.

"What are you saying, mother dear?" asked the child —the young Bradens were brought up to say "father" and "mother."

Hilda's eyes were full of happy tears, and her face was beautiful with all matronly grace and sweetness, as she replied, "My darling, I have been thinking how good God has been to me; how very, *very* good; more than I can tell. And I was saying, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits!' . . . 'I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. My meditation of Him shall be sweet; I will be glad in the Lord!'"

And to herself she said, "Ah, how little we know! How foolish I was to dread going to the Grey House! If we could but trust more, and *feel* that all things are, and must be, working for our good!"

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